

False news is not your friends.

We're seeing more and more local newspapers and media outlets go under, and these local outlets are kind of the connective tissue between people and their governments.

Facebook is changing so you see more from your friends, unless of the stuff that gets in the way.





President of Estonia Kersti Kaljulaid (center left) meets with President of Russia Vladimir Putin (center right) (The Russian Presidential Press and Information Office / CC BY 4.0)

president, Kersti Kaljulaid, has actually done a little sabbatical where she moves her presidential administration to Narva and there's a lot of investment in the town, and for the first time people are kind of feeling like they matter when they've been neglected to a strong degree. So, a lot of the responses that I advocate for in my work are based on people. These problems that exist can be exploited by any bad actor, whether it's Russia, Iran, China, Bangladesh, or Venezuela, as we've seen recently.

It's one thing to say: we need to have good governance. You can't exactly legislate that, but you educate people. You can also invest more in civics because a lot of the disinformation that we see has legs because people don't understand how the government works. If they understood what it was actually like inside a lot of these government agencies or even at their local level, I think a lot of this stuff would seem a lot less intriguing.

I think that sort of thing is a wider spread than most people recognize, and part of that is the atrophying local media environment as well. We're seeing more and more local newspapers and media outlets go under, and these local outlets are kind of the connective tissue between people and their governments. So those are the things that are exploited and those are the things that I

think we need to focus on repairing.

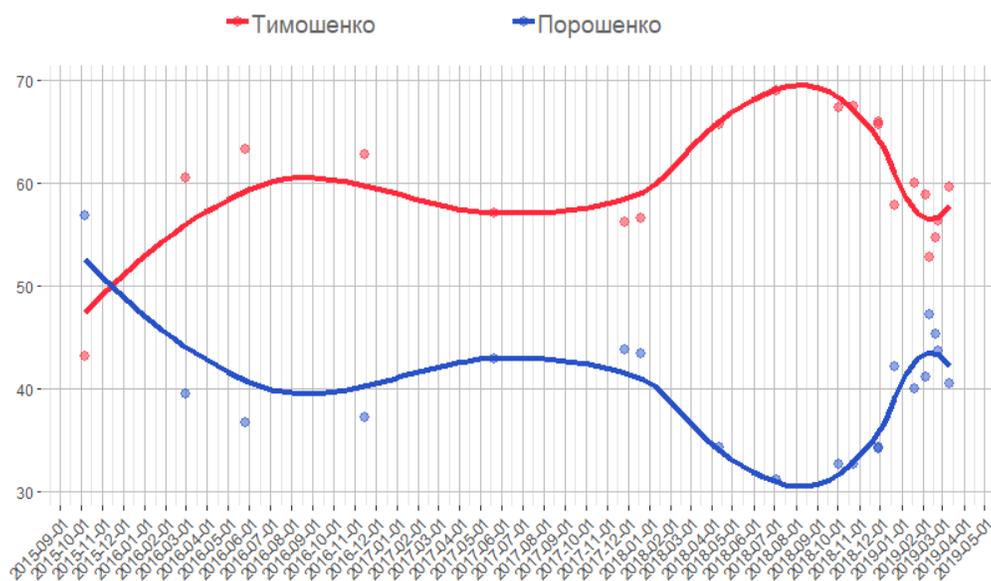
FSR: That's fascinating. I also read that you've managed democracy programs in places like Belarus. Can you talk a bit about your experiences there?

NJ: The National Democratic Institute has been around for about 35 years. They manage democracy assistance programs all over the world but got their start kind of in the end of the Soviet-era in Eurasia and Eastern Europe. I worked on Russia and Belarus, and a lot of the assistance that we did with activists in those countries is centered around political parties: party building, party communications. We did some election observation trainings and skills building as well. We designed programs that activists could come to and work on how to conduct voter outreach or how to do petitions on how to make civil initiatives happen in their communities.

Belarus, in particular, is really interesting because of its geopolitical position. It's kind of like a pendulum that swings back and forth between Russia and the West. When it's not getting what it wants from Putin, it comes to the west and the West is like, *ah, finally this is our chance to make a difference in Belarus*. But inevitably something else happens that brings it back to Putin. So

Другий тур: Тимошенко-Порошенко

Відсоток серед респондентів, які мають намір голосувати і визначились з кандидатом



2019 Ukrainian Presidential Election's second round. Tymoshenko (red) vs Poroshenko (blue) (Kosandr / CC BY-SA 4.0)

we've seen that happen. The most recent one before this was in 2010, and we're seeing it happen again. This is the third such pendulum swing, and they often end in a crackdown on democratic activists.

This one has been brought about by the fact that Lukashenko doesn't like that Putin has designs on Belarus. There's already Russian military bases in Belarus, and there's been some talk of the "Putinization" of Belarus. Lukashenko likes that. If you read any of these hot takes in any of the foreign policy type establishment magazines that are writing about the new thaw Belarus, it might look like a thaw, but it's not going to last one way or another. That's why Lukashenko has been in power for 30 years. And human rights and civil rights in Belarus are still really quite poor. So we might look and say, *you know, he's trying to cozy up to us*, but we should look at it at face value and understand that this is often how things work there.

FSR: What do you think Russia's influence is going to be over the upcoming elections in the Ukraine?

NJ: Well, Ukraine has always been the kind of laboratory or petri dish for all of these techniques. We saw some Sputnik-related pages get taken down recently where they were posing as local news outlets. They were looking like local news and talking about these issues and

then linking back to Sputnik content. This is where they create trust around real issues, then try to get people to turn out, whether that's signing a petition or changing their profile picture on Facebook or coming out to an event like a protest.

Ukrainians have a lot of apathy toward their government right now and toward all of the candidates. Polling is really hard in Ukraine, but the last I saw, around 20 percent of voters are still totally undecided, and the election is in less than two months. There's only one new face, and then everybody else is a known quantity to Ukrainians. Ukrainians have a bit of savior complex where they want somebody new to fix things all the time. Certainly Poroshenko and Tymoshenko, the two other leading candidates, are quite tainted for various reasons, but they both have decently strong support. I mean it's still under 20 percent. So all this to say it wouldn't be hard to continue to inspire that apathy.

If you look at the posts that Facebook took down from Sputnik, they gave a couple of examples.

One of them was about the quality of water in that particular town. One of them was they had some NATO related posts, which isn't really a firebrand issue in Ukraine, but it's a little bit divisive. So again, real issues, real complaints, but things that if just kind of tweaked a

little bit could keep people home or have them vote for somebody that may not be as qualified for the post.

Facebook has said that is not going to allow political advertising to be bought from outside of Ukraine, but I don't think that will be hard to fake. I'm going to be looking for new things that they're Kremlin might be able to use in 2020 that they're trying out in Ukraine. But so far we've, I don't think we've seen too much of that.

FSR: What aspects do you see of the Russia disinformation campaign against the US in particular that are the most dangerous or insidious?

NJ: I think it is deceptively simple. I think a lot of people have focused rightly on protecting election infrastructure. We've seen a lot about the need to re-up our cyber fences around voter rolls and election commissions at the state level. And we need to make sure that the campaigns have good digital hygiene. And that's all really good and really important, especially on a campaign level because that was a bit difficult during 2016. But those are easy things to do. The much more difficult fixes are the ones that I was talking about before where we need to invest in people's greater understanding of the problem.

The way that Russia exploits that is two-fold. They use these preexisting fishers in society through positive campaigns, that are grounded in kernels of truth, if not totally true, but with like a crazy spin on it. This makes it really difficult for social media platforms to say, *this is fake, let's fact check those, and then if it's fake, we'll take it off the platform*. Because it's not necessarily fake news - I think it comes down to this lack of critical thought that a lot of people have based on online news consumption.

So there's a lot of focus and part of this is because of the Trump administration, the focus that they're putting on it, and the lack of political will to address these things. But there's a lot of focus on election infrastructure. Just yesterday (Feb. 5, 2019), the DHS and DOJ put out a statement about the report that they're delivering to the president that says that there was no tampering with voter rolls or votes during the midterms, which is true, but we know for a fact there was an ongoing online influence campaign. There probably still are accounts that are active on both Twitter and Facebook, probably more on these crazy alt-right websites, certainly on Reddit

we've seen that they're continuing to represent themselves as Americans and influence U.S. discourse.

That's the type of thing that's a lot more nefarious, a lot more insidious, and really hard to put a finger on. I don't think it's Russia's goal to actually go in and change voter tallies. I think they want to inspire doubt in the system. So even by DOJ and DHS putting that statement out there that says they didn't do it *this* time is feeding into the Russian goal because what Russia wants people to think is, *my vote might get changed, my vote doesn't matter as much, so I'm not going to go out to vote*. It's this very complex voter suppression psychological thing. All Putin has to do is rattle the door knob of one voter file once for us to have that doubt in the system. And that's more dangerous for democracy than any actual vote tampering that they could do.

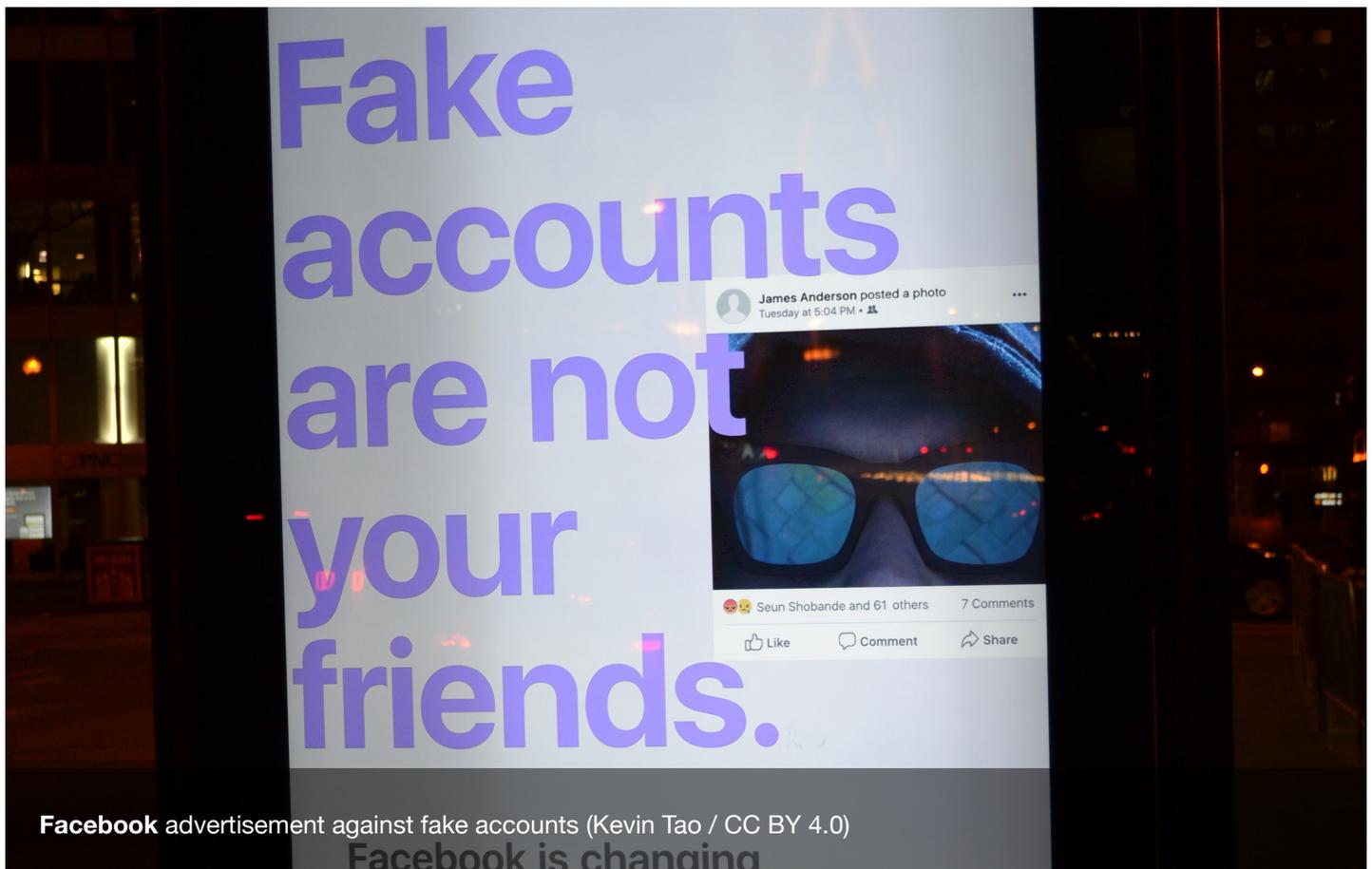
FSR: So they don't want to do the dirty work themselves. They want to inspire us to do it ourselves.

NJ: Absolutely. Whether you're talking about disinformation or cyber activities, that's exactly what Russia wants to do. And also it helps them have plausible deniability. It's like, *oh no, we didn't do it, are you really going to try to slap some sanctions on us for rattling the door handle to your voter roll?*

FSR: What do you think we can expect in the 2020 elections?

NJ: I get this question a lot and I think there's no reason to expect anything different. We've not seen enough of a change from the platforms, the government, or the public, to expect that any bad actor will really change their tactics. In fact, we've seen the Russian playbook has been laid bare for other bad actors, and we've seen it replicated across the countries that I named before. This is cheap. This is effective. They probably still have thousands of accounts working on their behalf.

Russia and others are also finding out ways to get around them. I think we'll see more of the same, except a bit less brazen. We're not going to see ads paid for in Rubles, or traffic coming from Russian IP addresses. It's going to be masked via VPN and they're going find other ways to get around it and pay for it, whether that's through explicit cooperation with sites or fringe entities that support the Russian mission. In terms of the actual tactics, there's no reason to think that they'll change.



Facebook advertisement against fake accounts (Kevin Tao / CC BY 4.0)

And I know that's not a super sexy answer, but it's the truth.

FSR: Are there other actors that you think are going to try to imitate Russia?

NJ: Well, we've already seen sites from Venezuela and Iran trying to do the same. China really hasn't gotten into this as much because they've got their own stuff at home, but I am sure they are creating their own textbook for these opportunities to exploit when they need to. I would also add that these tactics are being mimicked by homegrown actors as well. We're seeing it. In fact, I wrote a story about a candidate for Senate in Massachusetts who was running against Elizabeth Warren. You might've seen his crazy ads earlier in the year—Shiva Ayyadurai. He had an astroturfing operation that

I can't directly attribute it to his campaign, but I alerted Facebook to these accounts, which were clearly fake, they had fake profile pictures. They all posted the same things at the same times across a variety of anti-Warren and pro-Trump Facebook groups that were in favor of Shiva Ayyadurai. They're all added to groups by each other or by people associated with the campaign. So I don't know that this candidate said, *go create these accounts*, but someone who supported him was doing this.

That's the sort of thing that we're going to see a lot on both sides of the political aisle. And what I want to see is politicians standing up against it and saying, *all members of our party are going to adhere to these rules and we're not going to engage in the same type of behavior that bad foreign actors do*. Because otherwise, we're just totally screwed.

Nina Jankowicz

Nina Jankowicz is writing a book on the evolution of Russian influence campaigns in Eastern Europe. She has previously worked advising the Ukrainian government on communication and managed democracy assistance programs for Russia and Belarus. She is currently a Global Fellow at the Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars' Kennan Institute and has previously served as a Fulbright-Clinton Public Policy Fellow.