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Published online: 25 May 2019.

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Disinformation, performed: self-presentation of a Russian IRA account on Twitter

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ABSTRACT

How disinformation campaigns operate and how they fit into the broader social communication environment – which has been described as a 'disinformation order' [Bennett & Livingston, (2018). The disinformation order: Disruptive communication and the decline of democratic institutions. *European Journal of Communication*, 33(2), 122–139] – represent critical, ongoing questions for political communication. We offer a thorough analysis of a highly successful disinformation account run by Russia's Internet Research Agency: the so-called 'Jenna Abrams' account. We analyze Abrams' tweets and other content such as blogposts with qualitative discourse analysis, assisted by quantitative content analysis and metadata analysis. This yields an in-depth understanding of how the IRA team behind the Abrams account presented this persona across multiple platforms and over time. Especially, we describe the techniques used to perform personal authenticity and cultural competence. The performance of personal authenticity was central to her persona building as a likeable American woman, whereas the performance of cultural competence enabled her to infiltrate American conservative communities with resonant messages. Implications for understanding disinformation processes, and how some aspects of the hybrid media system are especially vulnerable to hijacking by bad actors are discussed.

Introduction

We now know that several disinformation campaigns operating during the 2016 US Presidential Election were quite successful at attracting widespread attention and inserting their messages into public discourse. Among the most prominent was the program run by Russia's Internet Research Agency (IRA) which, among other things, created thousands of social media accounts impersonating Americans from a variety of backgrounds and political views (US v. Internet Research Agency LLC, 2018).

How such campaigns operate, how they exploit properties of a complex hybrid media system (Chadwick, 2017) and how they fit into the broader social communication environment, described as a 'disinformation order' (Bennett & Livingston, 2018), are increasingly critical questions for political communication scholars.

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Our analysis privileges depth and contextualized understanding over breadth. Many extant studies of online media disinformation have employed 'big data' approaches to count interactions and quantify dissemination and exposure (e.g., Boyd et al., 2018). In contrast, we examine the multifaceted ways in which a single, and singularly successful, disinformation account was represented and developed practices of authenticity and resonant messages across multiple platforms and over time. This was the so-called 'Jenna Abrams' account. (Our use of 'Jenna Abrams' and 'she' in this study denotes the IRA team behind the 'Jenna Abrams' account.)

Our study thus complements existing quantitative-computational work and contributes theoretically to two ongoing conversations in the field of communication research. First, this study provides insights into the political implications of the 'fluidity' of self-identity in networked online spaces (Boyd, 2010; Papacharissi, 2010, 2018). The case of Jenna Abrams illustrates how strategic self-presentation could be co-opted by bad actors, becoming a tool to deceive and manipulate. As an account that was wholly not authentic, she represents the hardest possible test of strategic self-presentation processes.

Second, by illustrating how Jenna Abrams cultivated a conservative persona appealing to right-wing publics, we expand our understanding of disinformation as not only a matter of message dissemination, but also a process of cultural resonance. The Abrams account exploited the cultural identities of the American right, formed through years of inculcating by the right-wing media system (Grossmann & Hopkins, 2016) and deepened by the affordances of digital media (Marwick & Lewis, 2017). Therefore, our goal is to illuminate how interactions between Abrams' self-expression and the structural features of the media environment yielded a formidable weapon of information warfare.

In the following section, we introduce our case – the Jenna Abrams account operated by the IRA. It will be followed by a literature review of online disinformation, self-presentation and authenticity on social media, and U.S. conservative political culture. We then explain our data collection and methods before presenting the findings. Implications and suggestions for future research are discussed in the concluding section.

Enter the case of IRA and 'Jenna Abrams'

To properly contextualize the self-presentation of Jenna Abrams, it would be helpful to understand the objectives of her creators. While it is impossible to establish with certainty how the operators of the Abrams account understood their objectives, existing evidence suggests that the larger goals of the IRA campaign were to exacerbate division and sow discord among the American public (United States of America vs. Internet Research Agency et al, 2018) – a strategy that fits within a longer history of Soviet and Russian information warfare (Abrams, 2016).

The Russian campaign was multifaceted and included strategies such as information hacking, strategic leaking, purchased advertisements, and the management of 'organic' social media accounts. The preponderance of the Russian-driven content presented on social media through these techniques involved highlighting racial tensions and deep partisan divides on issues such as immigration, gun rights, and so on (Jamieson, 2018).

Impersonating a young, white, American woman, Jenna Abrams (@Jenn_Abrams) was the second most-followed English-speaking IRA Twitter account, with more than 70,000 followers by the time of her unmasking in November 2017. Her presence was not limited

to Twitter: she also operated accounts on Wordpress, Medium, Telegram, and Gab. An analysis by The Daily Beast revealed that Abrams was featured in articles by more than 30 media outlets, among them a number of mainstream news media like The New York Times and CNN (Collins & Cox, 2017) – clear evidence of her success at impersonating American political opinions. An illustrative example is her April 2016 tweet, provocatively noting:

> To those people, who hate the Confederate flag. Did you know that the flag and the war wasn't about slavery, it was all about money.

The tweet stirred up a sizeable controversy and drew in prominent commentators from both sides to criticize, ridicule, and defend her claim; one refutation from a journalist got tens of thousands of retweets and hundreds of thousands of likes (Tornoe, 2017; see Figure 1).

Apart from news media uptake, evidence that we gathered from Polititweet (https://polititweet.org) shows that her tweets were also directly retweeted by several of the most influential far right personalities in the United States, including Paul Joseph Watson (@PrisonPlanet), Richard Spencer, Mike Cernovich, and Mike Flynn Jr. Twitter metrics such as likes and retweets similarly attest to her meteoric rise within that space (Twitter, n.d.). While her tweets barely received likes and retweets at the beginning, they were able to attract on average as many as 700 likes and 500 retweets in her later stages on Twitter.

We take these data points as evidence that Abrams successfully generated substantial influence and response within the American public. How did Abrams construct an identity to do this? What affordances, cultures, and practices of digital media did Abrams draw on to create a persona compelling and persuasive enough to dupe so many audiences? Our multi-method analyses of Jenna Abrams presented below aim to answer these questions.

Literature review

Online disinformation and cultural identity

Research on disinformation is not new to the field of political communication (e.g., early studies by Floridi, 1996; Martin, 1982). Scholars have defined such influence campaigns as aiming for large-scale, pervasive information operations to influence a targeted

Figure 1. A journalist's refutation of Abrams' tweet (Tornoe, 2017).

population, in order to achieve political goals (Abrams, 2016). While such campaigns and practices have a long history, recent studies show that a lack of gatekeepers makes digital platforms particularly susceptible to disinformation, since users have to rely more heavily on cultural signifiers to evaluate other actors' statements (Kreiss, 2019; Marwick, 2018). For example, according to Daniels (2009), white supremacists used 'cloaked websites' to project a sense of cultural legitimacy in order to promote their political agenda. Along the same line, racial identity was performed and racial antagonism staged by fake Facebook accounts to stir up racial tension (Farkas, Schou, & Neumayer, 2017, 2018). Tripodi (2018) demonstrated how American conservatives' pre-existing belief that mainstream media are 'fake news' has led them to problematic sources like *Breitbart*.

Most of recent scholarly attention to online disinformation has been devoted to Russia's IRA disinformation program (e.g., Boyd et al., 2018; Farkas & Bastos, 2018; Jamieson, 2018). Although scholars have made important contributions in terms of how the current media ecosystem can facilitate the spread of disinformation (e.g., Faris et al., 2017; Golovchenko, Hartmann, & Adler-Nissen, 2018; Lukito et al., 2018b; Starbird, 2017), less is known about how IRA's activities exploited the ability to create and cultivate cultural identities that resonate with the targeted audiences.

In addition, research has shown that IRA-operated accounts are not homogeneous in content (Boatwright, Linvill, & Warren, 2018), and their influence in terms of follower count and media uptake is uneven (Lukito et al., 2018a). This warrants the need for in-depth analysis that focuses on the characteristics of the more successful accounts. In our case, Jenna Abrams' savvy persona-building was found to be a standout feature that arguably helped tap into her audiences' cultural identity.

Hence, this article aims to analyze two dimensions of Jenna Abrams' self-presentation that constitute her cultural appeals to her audience: her construction of an authentic persona, and her exploitation of the conservative partisan identity. The following two sections review pertinent literatures. Specific research questions raised by each body of literature are presented at the end of each section.

Self-presentation and authenticity on social media

Existing literature reveals a great deal about how individuals navigate online experiences in the age of 'context collapse' (Boyd, 2010). Scholars have adopted Goffman's (1959) idea of self-presentation in daily life to conceptualize the 'performance' of ordinary people on these sites (e.g., Ellison, Heino, & Gibbs, 2006; Papacharissi, 2012). Strategic self-presentation before an 'imagined audience' (Marwick & Boyd, 2011a) is one of the central pieces in people's digital life. Baym (2015) argues that Twitter shapes identities via the 'norms of authenticity and of self-branding' (p. 137).

More recently, the idea of strategic self-presentation and persona building has extended to the political realm. Not only is this evident in politicians' embrace of persona building (Usher, 2016), but also in the rise of 'political influencers' who make a career out of 'selling' political ideology online. Lewis (2018) wrote that right-wing influencers on YouTube constructed a sense of 'alternative credibility' that centered on relatability, authenticity, and accountability.

While authenticity has been a central concept in this line of research, communication scholars generally avoid explicitly defining it, citing the malleability and context-specificity

of such a concept (see Banet-Weiser, 2012; Marwick, 2013). Although their concern is valid, a clear definition that takes into account the slipperiness of authenticity would help guide empirical analysis. This study adopts a definition developed by cultural sociologist Jeffrey Alexander, who states,

> authenticity is thematized by such questions as whether a person is 'real' – straightforward, truthful, and sincere … If authenticity marks success, then failure suggests that a performance will seem insincere and faked: the actor seems out of role, merely to be reading from an impersonal script, pushed and pulled by the forces of society, acting not from sincere motives but to manipulate the audience. (Alexander, 2004, p. 548)

Most of all, what we draw from this conceptualization is that authenticity is always constructed through performance, and is based on the perception of the audience.

Disinformation practices entail manipulating authorship, obfuscating the true source of the content (Tudjman & Mikelic, 2003). Therefore, the ability to construct authenticity is a necessary prerequisite for the successful dissemination of disinformation.

In Abrams, we see an example of a deft performance leading to a fake persona that nonetheless represented authenticity for her targeted audience. To be specific, her motives were insincere, her goal was to manipulate the audience, and she was likely acting upon some directives by the IRA instead of performing honestly, yet she managed to amass tens of thousands of followers by pretending to be a young, female conservative living in the U.S. Therefore, we argue that Abrams represented the most challenging scenario wherein a user has to construct an authentic persona from scratch, a pure if pervert case of 'achieved micro-celebrity' (Marwick, 2013, p. 117). This paper aims to establish a systematic understanding of how the authenticity work of Abrams was carried out through performance.[1]

> **RQ1**: What strategies did Jenna Abrams employ to construct a persona that conveys authenticity to her target audience?

U.S. conservative political culture and 'deep stories'

Notably, Abrams did not merely establish an authentic individual identity; rather, in line with many other accounts controlled by the IRA, she performed a specific political identity – that of a strong conservative.

Growing evidence suggests that the political culture of U.S. conservatives is ideologically-driven, shaped by the right-wing media ecosystem. As Grossmann and Hopkins (2016) pointed out, Republicans have become much more ideological than Democrats since the 1980s. Over time, the former successfully built an extensive web of conservative ideological networks, including talk radio shows (Jamieson & Cappella, 2008), Fox News cable television channel (Hemmer, 2010), and a number of conservative think tanks. More recently, Faris et al. (2017) showed that conservative hyperpartisan websites also played a big role in perpetrating polarization.

The long-term result of such a network is a collective narrative that scholars called 'deep story', or 'feel-as-if story' (Hochschild, 2016, p. 206; also see Polletta & Callahan, 2019) that bonds conservative communities together through a set of cultural appeals. Citing Peck (2019), Marwick (2018) notes, 'Fox News uses a set of cultural referents like country music stars in their political rhetoric, which interpolates a particular class and race

identity: namely, white, blue-collar, and masculine – a strategy that [Peck] calls cultural populism' (Marwick, 2018, p. 494). Kreiss (2018) provided yet another account of the cultivation of partisan identity in the context of *Breitbart* stories.

This deep story of American resentment-conservatism is now widely enough recognized that its expression is available to a wider set of actors. As we shall see, its evocation and performance can be a critical component of affiliation in online spaces – indeed it was for Jenna Abrams. Hence, our second research question:

> **RQ2**: With what techniques did Abrams perform affiliation with the conservative deep story narratives?

Data collection

Abrams' tweets were collected from a Twitter archive that accesses Twitter's Streaming API. This archive collects a random 1% of all global tweets. We searched in the archive for all tweets originating from the Abrams account and retweets of her tweets. We then extracted Abrams' original tweets from the retweets and combined them with the original tweets. This resulted in 3,878 unique tweets between 24 January 2015 and 3 August 2017. Though bias is possible since highly retweeted tweets were more likely to be collected in our sample, we found that the metadata patterns of our dataset were largely consistent with the complete archive of Abrams' tweets in Twitter's release (Twitter, n.d.).

We observed that some tweets in this dataset were out of context. Some had a link that directed to a 'Account Suspended' page, likely denoting media content (e.g., pictures and videos) that were since deleted by Twitter. Some, starting with an @ sign, indicate they were replies. In many cases, these two issues rendered a tweet incomprehensible, or having little discernible meaning. Three coders were trained to code for out-of-context tweets that were subsequently removed (Krippendorff's alpha: 0.75). Our final dataset contains 2,894 tweets.

We used three other data sources to triangulate our findings. First, we studied Jenna Abrams' 45 blog posts (https://jennabrams.com/) from 21 May 2016 to 8 November 2017, when her Twitter account was suspended. In our dataset, there are 15 occasions where she tweeted a link to her blog, indicating that she was using multiple platforms as part of a unified identity presentation. Second, we accessed Jenna Abrams' Twitter profile pages over time via the Internet Archive (https://archive.org). Finally, we used Media Cloud (https://mediacloud.org) to gather media articles that mentioned Jenna Abrams during the period when she was active on Twitter.

Methods

We conducted an in-depth case analysis that takes advantages of archived social media content, and aimed to develop our understanding of Abrams' actions in both qualitative and quantitative terms. The primary method used in this paper is qualitative discourse analysis of Abrams's tweets and other digital content. This inductive approach aims to identify, conceptualize, and contextualize the unique strategies that Abrams used to construct her persona.

That said, our expectation is that a few widely-used self-presentation strategies identified by scholars (e.g., Marwick & Boyd, 2011b; Papacharissi, 2012), as described below,

will be at play regardless of the specific aims of the actor. Quantitative coding based on these predefined strategies (as well as an additional category identified in pilot coding) helps us verify and locate their usage in Abrams' content, thus guiding us to properly incorporate them into our explanatory account of Abrams' self-presentation.

Qualitative discourse analysis

Our primary analytical technique is a qualitative discourse analysis performed on the 2,894 tweets in our dataset. In discourse analysis, 'language is taken to be not simply a tool for description and a medium of communication (the conventional view), but as social practice, as a way of doing things' (Wood & Kroger, 2000, p. 4). In this study, we considered the collectivity of texts and visual content in our data (including tweets, blog-posts, and Twitter profile pages) as discourse, in which lies ample indications of the actions by Abrams. The aim of this discourse analysis was to discover 'systematic links between texts, discourse practices, and sociocultural practices' (Fairclough, 1995, p. 17) in the self-presentation strategies employed by this account.

Our analytical protocol consisted of three rounds of coding. It started as we read through all of our data thoroughly and took notes regarding the thematic and rhetorical features of the tweets that pertained to the goal of strategic self-presentation. As we went through the notes again, we conducted an initial round of open coding, using a host of thematic codes that emerged in our notes.[2] At this stage, we observed a conceptual split among the codes: some dealt with strategies for constructing a likeable persona, while others dealt with appealing to the right-wing target audience. The second round of coding, hence, aimed to examine the boundaries of as well as interconnections between those codes in light of our conceptual set-up, similar to axial coding in grounded theory (Glaser & Strauss, 2017). In this process, some codes were merged, some clarified with further notes, resulting in a parsimonious set of categories. This inductive approach resulted in two major points of focus: 'performed authenticity' and 'performed cultural competence,' which structure our presentation of results below. Finally, we went through coded data again in order to verify the explanatory capacity of the categories, make final adjustments, and ensure that we reached saturation.

Quantitative content analysis

We tested inter-coder reliability between three human coders using 27 percent of the sample ($n = 800$), following three training sessions. This is an acceptable sample for testing intercoder reliability rates (Gwet, 2014; Lombard, Snyder-Duch, & Bracken, 2002). For sparse or unevenly distributed variables, kappa agreement statistics produce a paradox (i.e., the statistic is low, but agreement is high) because it treats positive codes as chance agreements (Neuendorf, 2016). For this reason, average pairwise percent agreements are used instead. The rest of the tweets were split evenly and coded by the three coders.

Five variables were labeled dichotomously (1 = yes, 0 = no). A tweet was allowed to be coded as yes in multiple categories. The variables are described below:

(1) *Fan engagement* (Percentage of agreement: 93.67%): Marwick and Boyd (2011b) noted that public interaction with fans is a common strategy used by celebrities on Twitter,

because it lets the fans feel the 'closeness' to their idols. Although this strategy obviously works best with traditional celebrities with large fan bases, it is still reasonable to expect some degree of its use by Abrams.

This was coded as yes (1) if the tweet wanted to interact with the general audience. This included open-ended questions and questions asking followers to like or comment.

(2) *Rapport-building* (Percentage of agreement: 92.67%): 'Small talk' messages are another important strategy identified by Marwick and Boyd (2011b) in fans management: 'The many seemingly insignificant messages serve as phatic communication … reinforcing connections and maintaining social bonds.' (p. 147)

This was coded as yes (1) if the tweet included information about Jenna Abrams' 'personal life'. Motivational statements, greetings, and hashtag games were also considered rapport-building messages.

(3) *Affective expressions* (Percentage of agreement: 94.33%): Papacharissi (2012, 2015) emphasized the significance of affect in online communication, 'Emotion and feeling define modalities of belonging that are articulated as strangers connect and attach to each other.' (Papacharissi, 2015, p. 117). Affective expressions, thus, have the potential to incite engagement especially when paired with designed partisan messages.

This was coded as yes (1) if the tweet contained strong emotional language. Tweets with exclamation marks, repeated question marks, and capitalized statements (e.g., 'LOCK HER UP') were also coded as yes (1).

(4) *Cultural References* (Percentage of agreement: 94.33%): Marwick and Boyd (2011b) pointed out that 'Links and retweets provide good examples of the affiliative use of cultural markers and symbols. Generally, highly followed users RT or link to items that interest them and presumably their followers.' It is reasonable to expect Abrams tweeted about topics in American culture to appeal to her followers.

This was coded as yes (1) if the tweet contained references to American culture, including well-known holidays, sporting events, celebrities, and pop culture references.

(5) *News* (Percentage of agreement: 93.33%): This category originated from our pilot coding due to the frequency of news sharing. Tweets were coded as yes (1) in this category if the tweet shared information about a recent news story. Tweets that contained a combination of news and opinion were coded as yes (1) as well.

Metadata analysis

Finally, we analyzed the temporal metadata patterns of all the 3,878 tweets by Jenna Abrams, focusing on the types of tweets (original tweets, retweets, or replies) and the use of hashtags. A tweet was treated as a retweet if it started with 'RT @'; a reply tweet was determined if the 'in_reply_to_status_id_str' variable was not empty. The trajectory of Abrams' follower growth was also plotted and analyzed.

Findings

In the following, we present our analysis of the Abrams account holistically, by drawing on qualitative, quantitative, and metadata analyses together. The findings are organized in three sub-sections: the performance of authenticity, the performance of cultural competence, and how the two types of performance work together as a 'dual force'.

The performance of authenticity

A lot of Abrams' tweets are not serious takes on politics, some not about politics at all. Her tweet with a video of a dog 'singing and playing the piano' made it into UK media Independent after getting 'thousands of retweets' (Hooton, 2017). In comparison to her tweets about politics, what one would imagine from those funny, innocuous tweets is a likeable female personality who enjoys her life in the United States, much like a micro-celebrity (Marwick, 2013; Senft, 2008). One person even commented, under one of her Wordpress blogposts:

> You have a very unique way of expressing yourself … you're by far one of the most interesting 'expressionists'. This world lacks personalities. You have one. People are products. You're not.

This section will flesh out the techniques that Abrams employed towards building up a crafted persona that facilitated her engagement with her audiences.

An American girl

Jenna Abrams' Twitter profile indicated that she lived in the 'USA'. Throughout its operation, the account performed as a passionate American girl, displaying the behaviors of someone who cares about her country. First, there were explicit mentions of her 'home country':

> I am afraid that one day incompetent and greedy politicians will ruin the #US, our home! #WhatAreYouAfraidOf

Shortly after her account was suspended by Twitter, she posted on her blog a fairly long attack of The Daily Beast (an online media that exposed the Abrams account as fake) titled, ironically, 'Our democracy has been hacked' (Abrams, 2017), in which she offered point-by-point refutation of some claims made against her.

She also used a few common signifiers of an American citizen, the most blatant one being voting:

> I voted: #myvote2016 #voted #ElectionDay.

Other such tweets include a number of tweets honoring veterans, and some that commemorated the victims of 9/11, with the hashtag #NeverForget.

Pop culture or mass culture references (5.3%, $n = 154$) were another strategy that showed off her 'cultural affiliation' (Marwick & Boyd, 2011b) with fellow Americans:

> Best fancy outfit? Sure! #Grammys2015

> Kim Kardashian is pregnant! Hope she will have twins!

When it was a national holiday, Jenna Abrams would often tweet greetings or relevant quotes. This practice extended to some obscure, superficial celebrations such as 'National Taco Day' and 'National Kissing Day.'

> Patriotism is not always pride in what your country has, but what it doesn't have so that you can strive for it. (tweet on Independence Day, 2016)

While this set of tactics seem obvious and outright, these signals could be powerful cognitive cues that would enhance the trustworthiness of her persona. Sometimes the rhetoric about her American citizenship was in more subtle forms, but could be equally convincing:

> #YoSoyAmerican? Really? Could you please at least write it in English?!

This sort of tweets creates boundaries for who can and cannot be American, indicating that Abrams was well-versed in the cultural signifiers of American citizenship.

A likeable personality

The above example also displays her use of affective expressions, a powerful device to humanize a persona and appeal to the audience. Content analysis suggested that 10% of her tweets ($n = 289$) contained affective expressions, evoked both through words and punctuations. Both question marks and exclamation marks were often used in tandem, as a call to response. Many of these tweets were also political in content:

> President #Obama lied about gay marriage. This is why we're cynical. Sorry WHAT??! Obama lied??? No way!!!

To engage with her fans (7.9%, $n = 229$), Jenna Abrams actively asked questions or tweeted out simple 'polls':

> Are you happy with the choice of #AttorneyGeneral? Comments appreciated

> RT if you voted for Trump, like if you voted for Hillary #ElectionDay #myvote2016 #voted

Extraordinarily, Jenna Abrams even announced at least three Q&A sessions with her Twitter followers (with the hashtag #askjennaabrams), and posted her answers on her blog – this is a testament to her extensive effort to interact with fans.

Jenna Abrams also used everyday greetings, lifestyle content (e.g., puppy videos), and hashtag games to build rapport with her Twitter followers (12.5%, $n = 362$). Numerous occurrences of 'Good morning' and 'Have a great day' were seen in our dataset. Examples for hashtag games, in which Twitter users create tweets for fun or expressing fandom using a common hashtag, include #IfThe80sNeverStopped and #WhenIAmOldAndGrey.

Finally, when engaging with her followers, she often evokes the rhetoric of 'friends' to frame herself as part of the American in-group. She often used this term as part of a salutation (e.g., 'Good morning, my friends'). This was also occasionally supplemented with political statements:

> Have a good Tuesday, my friends and remember that it's 416 days till Obama leaves the Office.

> Ever feel useless? Remember that Germany has a president:) Good morning.

In fact, the pairing of political statements with lifestyle content, hashtags or salutation can be widely found across our dataset. Similarly, the ways she discussed politics was not always serious. Some tweets were merely political jokes or funny anecdotes:

> Get yourself a significant other who looks at you like Justin Trudeau looks at George Soros.

The performance of cultural competence

We use 'cultural competence' to denote Abrams' eloquence in tapping into U.S. conservative political discourse, which was rooted in her capability of digesting the cultural-political mindset of the American right.

An avid consumer of political information

In her tweets, Jenna Abrams performed as if she possessed a good amount of 'knowledge' regarding American politics, especially with divisive issues such as the Black Lives Matter movement, immigration, and feminism. We should note that this 'knowledge' is often shallow, not much more than 'talking points,' such as the aforementioned viral tweet about the Confederate flag. However, this kind of 'talking points-knowledge' is often enough to stir online controversy once tweets containing it was circulated far and wide.

Some tweets explicitly displayed her 'just enough' political knowledge, albeit not intellectually rigorous:

> If all Republicans were like Reagan and all Democrats were like JFK, this country would be going places

> Socialism is the number one killer of humanity in the twentieth century. It starts with 'free stuff' and ends with blood

A number of random quotes from George Orwell hinted at a dystopian view of politics and presumably served to incite cynicism towards the government:

> The most effective way to destroy people is to deny and obliterate their own understanding of their history - G.Orwell

Also, 13% of her tweets ($n = 377$) in our dataset contained news. While some are innocuous local news or anecdotes, a lot of the news shared by Jenna Abrams pertained to the aforementioned divisive issues:

> Christian student suspended after confronting Muslim professor for saying the Crucifixion was a hoax

The act of news sharing demonstrated her (performed) capacity as an avid follower of politics.

Moreover, she was able to send on-pitch right-wing partisan messages based on her understanding of political issues. Those messages were mostly reactionary discourse against liberal figures, activism, and political correctness:

> That's too much! #BlackLivesMatter is a disgusting hate movement

> Hi, I'm Ahmed! I can rape you or your sister and get away with it cause #refugeeswelcome'

Hashtags were uniquely created (e.g., #FeminismIsAwful'; #MuslimIsTheProblem) or 'hijacked' to counteract liberal agenda:

> Bernie Sanders proposes a small tax increase, totaling $19.6 trillion #FeelTheBern

> How did we go from protesting the hijab to celebrating it? #MuslimWomensDay

A deep story

In line with other research reviewed earlier, we found a deep story focusing on liberals' lack of 'common sense' and their 'hypocrisy' running through Jenna Abrams' tweets (Figure 2).

In July 2017, her Twitter bio included the claim 'Calm down. I'm not pro-Trump. I am pro-common sense.' Despite the affirmative use of 'common sense' in the bio, this phrase

Figure 2. Screenshot of Abrams' Twitter homepage on July 18, 2017.

was mostly used to mock liberal people's alleged lack of it. Similarly, 'hypocrisy' was used to expose the alleged inconsistencies between beliefs and actions seen in left-wing political figures. Explicit use of them includes:

> Happy 55th Birthday to our .@POTUS! Thanks for 7 years of ongoing lies and hypocrisy!

> #RightNowICouldUse my common sense to say that Islam oppresses women

However, tweets that convey this 'deep story' did not always use the two catchphrases explicitly. Rather, we found a common rhetorical strategy in the tweets: a juxtaposition of (most often distorted) facts or liberal statements, which either (1) attributes an absurd, nonsensical fact to a left-wing political figure's actions or liberal social activism:

> It's almost 8 years of Obama and people don't know which bathroom to use

or (2) displays incongruence between a liberal's ideological beliefs and actions, or between actions over time:

> Hypocrite starter pack: 1. Run against Wall Street corruption 2. Give endorsement to Hillary Clinton

In a word, to seed this deep story in her tweets, she was able to associate and contrast a range of liberal political deeds and reveal the so-called liberal 'hypocrisy' from an American conservative's perspective.

Speaking to the community

To tell the above deep story to the American conservative communities, Jenna Abrams frivolously used terms, catchphrases, and slogans typically circulated within the liberal circles, but also known (and distorted) among conservative people. For example, among the top ten most-used hashtags in our dataset, #FeelTheBern, #BlackLivesMatter, and #ReligionOfPeace are all popular phrases used by left-wing activists and political campaigns. These hashtags were used by Abrams to ridicule corresponding liberal ideas through

sarcasm, so the tweet text that surrounds them were usually either critical or disrespectful towards said ideas:

> Muslims can't even coexist with each other #ReligionOfPeace

Words and phrases popular in liberal circles, such as 'patriarchy' and 'white supremacist,' also appear frequently in the non-hashtag form:

> That awkward moment when you can't call a pro-Trump person a misogynistic white supremacist

Therefore, Jenna Abrams showed an ability to hijack elements of left-wing political discourse and re-interpret them using a logic that is familiar to her target audience. This ability likely contributed to her appeal as a knowledgeable political influencer.

We observed that sarcasm was often used by Jenna Abrams to discredit liberal ideas. In August 2016, she even tweeted:

> #ForgiveMeForSayingThisBut I'll label you stupid if you don't understand obvious sarcasm

Aside from sarcasm, she used a 'compare and contrast' approach that implies where the comparison point is rather than reveals it. For example, she once tweeted:

> Japan has accepted 27 refugees last year, has rejected 99%. Haven't heard about any terrorists' attacks there

The significance of the indirect delivery strategy lies in the fact that in order to fully grasp her 'deep story' of common sense and hypocrisy, one has to be a member of the conservative community and familiarize themselves with certain conservative beliefs and counter-beliefs against liberals. By doing so, Jenna Abrams will likely be perceived as an in-group member, thus enhancing her influence on the American conservative community.

A dual force within an attention-driven platform

It is important to note that these performances of personal authenticity and cultural competence cannot work individually; they have to work in concert as a 'dual force' to produce a suitable self-presentation for the purpose of disinformation. Without an authentic, engaging persona to carry the 'deep stories,' the stories would likely be deemed less relatable and trustworthy. Without a consistent narrative that taps into a cultural-political line of thought, the authenticity work would be rendered pointless given that the overall goal of the IRA is to sow discord among the American public.

Meanwhile, it should be noted that both strategies in this 'dual force' are fundamentally cultural. The performance of authenticity drew on cultural resources in American pop culture, collective memory, and symbols of national identity; the performance of cultural competence, evidently, exploited the cultural worldviews of a targeted subgroup.

In this regard, we can find a parallel in the American right-wing media system. As Polletta and Callahan wrote:

> Conservative media commentators often styled a personal relationship with the viewer or listener, in which allusive stories reinforced the bond between speaker and audience.

> The people who believed in the deep story and who voted for Donald Trump heard compelling stories on conservative media, but they also heard a style of talk that was engaging. (p. 13)

Jenna Abrams' task was arguably tougher than American conservative commentators in that she began with little recognition among other American Twitter users. Therefore, as we have shown, she devoted considerable effort to build a likeable persona through a host of tactics.

Furthermore, the 'dual force' of performances was assisted by exploiting the attention dynamics on Twitter in the early stage of Abrams' activity. Our metadata analysis showed that 83% of Abrams' replies to others' tweets in our dataset were sent in 2015, many of which were responding to mainstream news media or high-profile politicians. We also observed that in 2015, her most-used hashtags included more generic ones concerning current events and politicians, like #isis and #obama, while some more original hashtags were used much more often in later stages. Both replying to prominent users and using generic hashtags are useful tactics to seek attention from general Twitter users, thus increasing her visibility and potential to gain followers.

The growth of Abrams' following had three hikes in early 2015, but after those early hikes, her follower growth was largely steady except a minor bump in early 2016. As Webster and Ksiazek (2012) pointed out, metrics of attention such as follower count on Twitter could lend further credibility to content providers like Abrams, facilitating her status as opinion leader (Figure 3).

Discussion

This paper has presented an in-depth investigation of the strategic self-presentation and content curation of a high-profile IRA account, Jenna Abrams. We have demonstrated
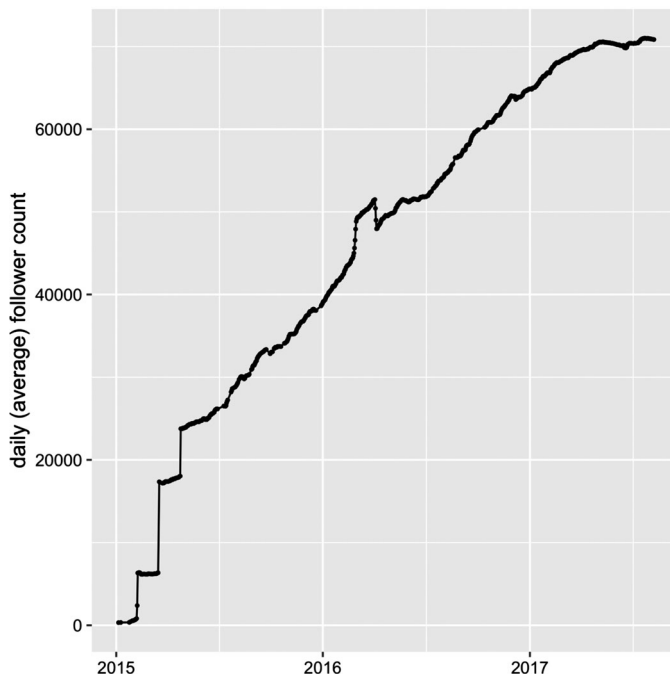

Figure 3. Abrams' Twitter follower growth.

that her performances of personal authenticity and cultural competence were adept, and it likely propelled Abrams' success at recruiting a sizeable following and entering both conservative and mainstream media discourse. Two points of discussion emerge:

First, Abrams' persona-building approach is a reminder that just like other kinds of communication processes, disinformation should not be viewed only as a matter of transmission and diffusion; it is also one of cultivation (Gerbner, Gross, Morgan, & Signorielli, 1986) and ritual (Carey, 2002), where rich cultural dynamics between the sender and the receiver mediate the effects of media messages. Hence, this paper echoes with Marwick (2018)'s call to go beyond the 'magic bullet theory' of disinformation, namely the view that people share problematic information simply because they believe it to be true. To paraphrase Carey (2002), while Jenna Abrams did impart information upon her followers, it was 'the representation of shared beliefs' (p. 39), accomplished through an authentic persona and savvy message design, that marked the essence of this approach.

Technological affordances are the focus of our second discussion point. Specifically, the case of Jenna Abrams shows that a number of features once portrayed mainly as positive aspects of digital media can be co-opted by bad actors. On one hand, freedom of identity expression online has been seen as a source of agency, an opportunity for individuals to 'play with' their own image and control how others perceive them (e.g., Papacharissi, 2012), or even achieve higher social status (Marwick, 2013; Marwick & Boyd, 2011b). In our case, however, Jenna Abrams was able to exploit this feature of self-presentation in social media to deceive for political goals. If the possibilities of identity play are left wide open on digital platforms, coordinated efforts such as those by the IRA are able to pose significant danger to the democratic publics.

On the other hand, the Abrams account is yet another example of the current internet culture of 'engagement' being exploited. Early celebratory accounts of participatory culture and online communities (e.g., Jenkins, 2006) have now largely given way to grave reckonings about the pervasive trolling and the incubation of toxic worldviews in sites like 4chan (Marwick & Lewis, 2017; Phillips, 2015). Lewis (2018) showed that conservative influencers on YouTube used 'alternative credibility,' which foregrounded relatability and authenticity as opposed to journalistic authority. In our case, Jenna Abrams created a niche persona to precisely target and engage with the online conservative community in the U.S.

Based on our findings, we identify the following future research possibilities for the consideration of other researchers. First, while this study provides ample evidence that performative strategies were used by an IRA account, it does not directly engage in the measuring of effectiveness. Researchers might find our findings useful to inform their operationalization of content variables, and formally test the effects of such strategies and the variances among them.

Second, this study engages with the 'messages' part of Marwick (2018)'s three-part theory of disinformation effects consisting of actors, messages, and affordances. Future studies adopting this theory should look into the other two parts, namely people who are affected by problematic information and the role of digital platforms, in order to complete a full landscape of contemporary disinformation.

Third, researchers are encouraged to study the performances of authenticity, cultural competence, and other potential types of self-presentation in different contexts of disinformation, or in the wider political realm. What are some strategies used by disinformation accounts targeting liberal activist communities, racial minorities, nationalist groups,

etc.? How about the self-presentation strategies of the new generation of digital-savvy politicians (e.g., see Gerbaudo, 2019)? Comparative studies of identity expression among political actors can also be revealing.

Notes

1. Thus, though Hogan's (2010) contention that 'performance' does not capture online interactions as well as 'exhibition' is well-taken, in our specific case we adopt Papacharissi's (2012) terminology of 'performance' to conceptualize Jenna Abrams' self-presentation. We would like to show that in a space where all identities need to be performed – as Papacharissi and others suggest, fake ones are perfectly welcome to join in.
2. Five categories used for quantitative content analysis were not included in discourse analysis categories, though we still wrote notes when they applied.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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