



Cyber Conflicts and Geopolitics

The Mueller Investigation

Cyber espionage, interference in foreign elections and the theft of confidential information have all become prominent aspects and threats to cybersecurity over the past 20 years, especially within the United States. Election campaigns, particularly the 2016 presidential election, faced cyberattacks by foreign states trying to access and influence information. American adversaries such as China and Russia have been suspected and accused of committing cyberattacks on American intellectual property and interfering with the 2016 presidential election.

In May 2017, the Justice Department appointed former FBI Director Robert S. Mueller III as a special counsel to oversee the investigation into ties between President Trump's campaign and Russian officials. One aspect of this investigation focused on cyber intrusions – hacking, social media trolls, propaganda, WikiLeaks – all to discover who knew what, when, how and why.

So, why did the investigation focus primarily on the Trump administration if Russian intelligence was behind the cyberattacks? The simple answer – collusion. Did President Trump or his administration know about the interferences and were they involved?

After one year and 10 months, special counsel Robert Mueller completed his investigation, indicting 34 people – some of President Trump's closest advisors and Russian intelligence operatives – revealing details of the sophisticated effort to affect the election.¹

These indictments included charges for tax evasion, lying to Congress and to the FBI and witness tampering, amongst other serious charges. The majority of

¹ Christal Hayes and Ashley Shaffer, "Your guide on Robert Mueller's final report on Trump, Russia and what happens next," *USA Today*, March 20, 2019, <https://www.usatoday.com/story/news/politics/2019/03/20/robert-mueller-final-report-trump-russia-investigation-your-guide-what-to-expect/3143383002>.



the people accused and charged of these crimes were closely related to Trump's campaign and administration – longtime advisor, Roger Stone; national security adviser, Michael Flynn; former campaign chair, Paul Manafort; and former campaign adviser, George Papadopoulos.²

However, there were a few organizations and individuals indicted who didn't have a direct connection to President Trump. The first, a Dutch lawyer named Alex van der Zwaan, was secretly paid millions for a report he did over the former Ukrainian Prime Minister Yulia Tymoshenko's trial. He later lied to investigators about his contacts.³ Other indictments without a direct relation to Trump included the Russian-based Internet Research Agency, two other Russian entities and 13 Russian individuals all charged with trying to interfere with the 2016 election through social media campaigns and contacts with political organizers in the U.S.

The Russian influence via social media platforms like Facebook and Twitter came in the form of "information operations," otherwise known as bots and trolls, utilized to target certain demographics with segmented messages and disinformation.⁴ Other strains of criticisms followed this exposure - "including privacy breaches, human rights abuses, and a deflection of corporate responsibility."⁵ Due to the rise in social media usage and development, cyberattacks through these platforms pose a great threat to cyber security globally, especially to governments and unexpectant users.

So, what does this mean for social media? What does this mean for you as a user?

There have already been movements and efforts to delete accounts, protest usage and encourage others to do so as well in retaliation to the companies'

² "Mueller Indictments: Who's Who," *The Wall Street Journal*, Jan. 25, 2019, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/mueller-indictments-whos-who-1531511838>.

³ Alex van der Zwaan was charged on February 16, 2018. He was sentenced and served 30 days in prison, then turned over to U.S. immigration officials and left the country.

⁴ Hamza Shaban and Taylor Telford, "Facebook and Twitter get an avalanche of criticism about Russian interference," *Los Angeles Times*, Dec. 18, 2018, <https://www.latimes.com/business/technology/la-fi-tn-facebook-twitter-20181218-story.html>.

⁵ Ibid.



behavior and actions, or lack thereof. Although dropping all forms of social media would be a quick and easy fix, it's not so simple. Aside from social media platforms, companies and businesses are also at risk, meaning you are too.

Think about your online usage, your login information for different websites, even your email. Any personal information you disclose electronically could be put into jeopardy. The issue is that protecting yourself from cyberattacks isn't as easy as it sounds; hackers are continuously getting more sophisticated and cyberattack prevention will require more than just protesting social media or changing passwords.

Overall, the Mueller investigation was an important factor in the exposure of Russian intervention in the U.S. elections, displaying how cyberattacks and espionage pose a major threat to national security through a variety of means. Going forward, addressing and dealing with cyber conflict will require new outlooks on 21st century warfare, something the United States must be ready to adjust to and prepare for.