

A Theory of Communication That Posits Effects

Some dismiss out of hand the notion that Russian interventions affected citizens' decision making in 2016. Others assert outright that without the Russian trolls' and hackers' subversions, Hillary Clinton would have been elected and the Republican Party nominee returned to life as a CEO of enterprises branded "Trump." By instead suggesting that the likely impact of the troll trickery was negligible, a claim that sidesteps the possibility that the cyberthefts elicited effects, others have taken a more nuanced position. "The Russian propaganda activities detailed in Robert Mueller's indictment last week [February 16, 2018] had less impact on the election," argues *Wall Street Journal* columnist Holman W. Jenkins Jr., "than 20 seconds of cable TV coverage (pick a channel) of any of Mr. Trump's rallies."¹

Lost in this highly charged wrangle are years and terabytes of research speaking to the ways in which communication can affect knowledge, beliefs, and even ballots. From the contest between FDR and Wendell Willkie in 1940 to the one between Romney and Obama in 2012, researchers have observed

campaign-created changes in attitudes and behaviors: most ephemeral but some enduring, most small but some substantial. The instigators of central interest in past years were interpersonal influence and mass communication, with the latter usually assuming the form of news, ads, and debates. As the sophistication of research methods grew, so too did the realization that mass media and the more personal forms of exchange interacted not only with each other but also with the dispositions of audiences in ways that could magnify or minimize the effect of communication.

Despite dead ends and wrong turns, and occasionally because of them, these seventy-five-plus years of study have revealed when and, if so, how, at some times but not others, each of us is affected by the news, ads, debates, and other forms of communication within our ken. In the process of this sleuthing, our vocabularies have expanded to include such concepts as reinforcement, priming, framing, agenda setting, two-step flow, heuristics, contagion, the spiral of silence, and micro-targeting. Along the way, scholars have refined their ability to identify the characteristics and circumstances that increase audience susceptibility to influence. When the existence of the presumed cause reliably predicts the hypothesized effect in contest after contest, experiment after experiment, study after study, our confidence that a finding is not idiosyncratic grows. So too when convergent conclusions are reached by different ways of knowing (e.g., surveys, panels, and experiments). Hypotheses become principles when we understand how stimulus *x* produces response *z*, and we can specify the conditions under which that sequence occurs.

Because fear appeal was a key feature of troll messaging, let me telegraph what we know about how that use of emotion works and how I will use such knowledge in this book. Interpolating the troll strategy (which in the next sentence I will synopsise and insert in brackets) into the findings of a state-of-the-art meta-analysis will illustrate the nexus I will posit between past research and my hypotheses about the 2016 troll and hacking effects. That meta-analysis of what is known about fear in messaging found that “the effectiveness of such appeals increased when the message included efficacy statements [the trolls called for liking and sharing this message], depicted high susceptibility and severity [among other uses, the trolls cast “illegal” immigrants as resource-draining, job-stealing criminals], recommended one-time-only (vs. repeated) behaviors [vote against Hillary Clinton or for

Donald Trump], and targeted audiences that included a larger percentage of female message recipients [women in the social media stream may have been more susceptible to fear appeal].”²

As this exercise hints, despite a few stumbles that I will treat at greater length in the next chapter, the Russians’ messaging was strategically adept. Their skill at impersonation and misdirection is evident both in their social media posts and in their reliance on a credible front group to inject hacked content into the election. The legacy media were complicit in this effort. By routinely crediting the purloined content to WikiLeaks, not St. Petersburg, for example, the news media deflected attention from Russia’s role. The success of the St. Petersburg masking was also on display when duped Americans shared Russian-generated posts within their networks and “unwittingly”³ helped organize their rallies.

Awkward grammar aside (more on this in a later chapter), the troll messaging employed tried-and-true persuasive gambits. Using classic means of constructing an enemy,⁴ they cast the electoral choice in “us-versus-them” zero-sum-game terms ready-made to harness fears of cultural change. To that frame they soldered a causal one, blaming the anxieties plaguing the target audience on cultural and economic changes created by and benefiting “them.” At the same time, the Russian hacks and posts stressed issues and traits more favorable to Trump than his Democratic counterpart and weighted the communication climate with anti-Clinton messaging. Each form of subversion—the social media messaging and the hacking—discernibly altered the communication available to at least some deciding whether and, if so, for whom to vote in the election’s final weeks.

Those alleging that Kremlin-tied trolls, bots, and hackers could not have affected enough voters to swing a close election are paddling against currents of scholarship showing that audiences are influenced by agenda setting, framing, and priming. Commentators who contend that the imposter content could not have mobilized or demobilized voters are flying into headwinds created by research confirming that voters can be influenced by the relative weighting of messaging in news and ads. Never all voters. And in most cases, not even most. But there were greater numbers of susceptible citizens in 2016 than in past years for three overlapping reasons: (1) an unusually high level of voter disaffection with both major party nominees;⁵ (2) a higher than average

percentage of self-identified independents in the voting population,⁶ with 39 percent making that claim in 2016;⁷ and (3) a larger than ordinary proportion of the population—by one calculation, as many as one in eight⁸—making a decision in the last week before the election.

Those three categories are of course interrelated. When they vote at all, the Hamletic citizens in that late-deciding category tend to be less attached to a political party and hence more persuadable than those who make up their minds earlier.⁹ On average, they also are less attentive to the ins and outs of politics¹⁰ and less politically sophisticated,¹¹ factors that heighten the power of persuasion in general and of message framing and weighting in particular. Moreover, one reason that there were so many late deciders was dissatisfaction with the available options. Whatever the sources of their reluctance, last-minute deciders figured importantly in 2016. The 14 percent of the Wisconsin electorate that selected a candidate in the last week broke for Trump over Clinton, 59 percent to 30 percent.¹² In Pennsylvania, the Republican carried those who made up their minds in the final days by seventeen points and in Michigan by eleven.¹³

The goal of this chapter is telegraphing what scholars know about how campaign-related messaging affects votes and voters. In subsequent chapters, I argue that Russian-originated or stolen communication could have elicited the same kinds of effects as those we have seen in past elections by: shaping the agenda and framing of the news media; reweighting the message environment in news and social media; priming and reinforcing anti-Clinton content; capitalizing on timing consistent with short-term effects; and relaying and creating content designed to mobilize and demobilize key constituencies. But before offering a number of generalizations about the ways in which messaging can influence voters, let me both outline a few of the psychological processes that help explain how they achieve their ends and note how interpersonal and mass communication can affect voter intentions.

The Role of Basic Psychological Processes in Political Persuasion

Citizens don't ballot on the basis of systematic assessment of all available evidence. Nor do they necessarily focus on the same issues or attributes

election after election or, in some cases, even week after week. Moreover, different voters may weigh the importance of a given issue differently as well. Defined as exposure that increases cognitive accessibility, the process known as priming plays a role in determining which issues, candidate traits, and language are at play when voting decisions are being forged. Both agenda setting, a media effect that shapes what audiences think about, and framing, a message effect that influences the ways that they think about a topic or issue, involve priming, a phenomenon that increases the cognitive accessibility and hence awareness of the existence of the primed language, topic, frame, or emotion. In a social media age, it is important to add that contagion (i.e., the infection-like spreading of an emotion, belief, or idea from person to person, group to group) plays a key role in the diffusion of primed content. Before showing that messaging can affect votes and voters, and specifying the conditions that limit or boost those effects, let me note a few of the ins and outs of priming, framing, agenda setting, and contagion.

Priming Increases the Cognitive Accessibility of the Primed Issues, Traits, and Language

Priming occurs when exposure to a stimulus produces an effect on memory and hence on subsequent responses. By making them more cognitively accessible, priming is able to make some issues, candidate characteristics, or concepts more salient or focal than others in decision making. Whereas Social Security preservation and reform were top of mind for the presidential candidates and voters in 2000, the economy was focal in 2008. In both elections these issues were prominently featured and as a result primed in news, ads, debates, and speeches. “Lockbox” was the term Democratic nominee Al Gore primed in 2000 to say that he would safeguard Social Security revenue. “Fuzzy math” was the language that his Republican counterpart, George W. Bush, primed to dispute Gore’s calculations of the relative merits of the tax plans of the two. Whereas in 2004 Bush surrogates primed the notion that the incumbent was “resolute,” Democratic standard-bearer John Kerry cast his opponent as “stubborn.” The attitudinal effects of each of these moves have been documented.

The content that is primed matters because voters adopt criteria for assessment of candidates on the basis of accessibility—how quickly and automatically such criteria come to mind. If a criterion has been the subject of a lot of attention, it will be more accessible. Accordingly, when discussions of immigration dominate one's newsfeed and other issues receive less attention, that issue will become more salient to that person and more likely to be used in her assessment of candidates than less prominently featured issues or than those ignored altogether. When media produce this effect by concentrating attention on some issues rather than others, they set an agenda. Because some issues, traits, and language advantage one candidate more than the other, the content that is primed can be consequential. It matters even more when audiences are already disposed to regard the topic as of interest. Micro-targeting makes it possible to heighten the salience of different issues with different constituencies.

Agenda Setting Primes What We Think About

Captured in Bernard Cohen's memorable axiom, the press "may not be successful much of the time in telling people what to think, but it is stunningly successful in telling its readers what to think about,"¹⁴ agenda setting's power has been confirmed in studies demonstrating the relationship between the most-often-covered issues and what the audience considers important. Such effects lurked in the famous 1940 Erie, Pennsylvania, data, where, near the end of the Roosevelt-Willkie campaign, the topics on which the media had been focusing increased in salience to some voters.

Consistent with that early finding, after correlating issues that undecided Chapel Hill, North Carolinians considered important with those featured in the media in 1968, journalism scholars Maxwell McCombs and Donald Shaw found that the press agenda guided what susceptible voters thought about.¹⁵ The agenda-setting effect between the media (here the *New York Times*) and the public (reflected in a Gallup measure of public opinion) persisted as the United States moved from a few dominant news channels in 1956 to a proliferation of them in 2004. As press scholars Yue Tan and David Weaver showed, the average agenda-setting correlation (i.e., the association between the issue featured in news and the audience's assessment of its relative importance)

was .51, which indicates that 26 percent of the variance was explained by the theory.¹⁶ In other words, the issues highlighted in news help determine the ones prioritized by the citizenry.

Because candidacies benefit from different issues, media agenda setting can advantage one aspirant over another. Not only does research verify that mainstream media produce agenda-setting effects, but so too do their social media competitors. In the former case, in 1987, political scientist Ben Page and his colleagues demonstrated that the content of network television accounted for “a high proportion of aggregate changes (from one survey to another) in U.S. citizens’ policy preferences.”¹⁷ In the latter, when Facebook scientists shuffled hard news articles being shared by friends to the top of newsfeeds, occasional Facebook users who saw more news in their feeds reported paying more attention to government and, after the election, also were more likely to say that they voted.¹⁸ These findings suggest that when stories reporting on WikiLeaks content captured news attention throughout the last month of the election, media agenda setting increased their salience and with it the likelihood that voters would use that content and the frames within it in assessing Clinton’s candidacy. More on frames in a moment.

By setting news agendas, topics trending on social media can affect voters indirectly. The content that is trending can influence them directly as well. “Regardless of who follows whom on a given social media platform,” notes internet expert Lt. Col. Jarred Prier of the US Air Force, “a trending topic can bridge the gap between clusters of social networks. A malicious actor can quickly spread propaganda by injecting a narrative onto the trend list.”¹⁹ By using automated accounts called bots to increase the likelihood that some topics would trend, the Russians helped propel anti-Clinton themes into news.

When they increased the likelihood that anti-Clinton content would trend, the trolls elicited agenda setting. If you saw news segments in 2016 about those self-identifying as deplorables, it is likely that the belief that the topic was popular played some role in reporters and editors’ decisions to promote those stories. Observe the time clock underlying the following report of a now-famous Clinton statement in the *New York Times*:

“You know, to just be grossly generalistic, you could put half of Trump’s supporters into what I call the basket of deplorables. Right?” she said

to applause and laughter. “The racist, sexist, homophobic, xenophobic, Islamophobic—you name it. And unfortunately there are people like that. And he has lifted them up.”

By Saturday morning, #BasketofDeplorables was trending on Twitter as Mr. Trump’s campaign demanded an apology.²⁰

Hillary made this remark on a Friday night. By the next morning the hashtag was trending. And as it was doing so, the Republican campaign demanded an apology. The reporter’s account provides evidence that “trending” was a factor in understanding what’s going on here.

We know that Russian trolls helped make that hashtag trend because Prier tracked the identity change that one poseur underwent in the process of joining the troll chorus. “Before the ‘basket of deplorables’ comment,” he writes, “the trolls primarily used an algorithm to rapidly respond to a tweet from Donald Trump. . . . However, after the Clinton speech, a ‘people search’ on Twitter for ‘deplorable’ was all one needed to suddenly gain a network of followers numbering between 3,000 and 70,000. Once again, [the Russian troll] FanFan’s name changed—this time to ‘Deplorable Lucy’—and the profile picture became a white, middle-aged female with a Trump logo at the bottom of the picture. The FanFan follower count went from just over 1,000 to 11,000 within a few days.” Observing “Deplorable Lucy,” Prier finds that “tracing his follower trail again led to the same groups of people in the same network [as past trolling efforts], and they were all now defined by the ‘Deplorable’ brand. In short, they were now completely in unison with a vast network of other Russian trolls, actual American citizens, and bot accounts from both countries on Twitter. With a large network consisting of Russian trolls, true believers, and bots, it suddenly became easier to get topics trending with a barrage of tweets.”²¹

The agenda-setting effect of trending topics is produced because journalists use that phenomenon as a sign that a subject is newsworthy. When reporters spend a lot of time online—with “more than half (53.8 percent) . . . regularly [using] microblogs such as Twitter for gathering information and reporting their stories”²²—they create a “symbiotic relationship” between the agendas in Twitter posts and news.²³ Among the common uses to which journalists put social media are “check[ing] for breaking news (78.5 percent) and seeing what

other news organizations are doing (73.1 percent).”²⁴ If a trending topic or meme shows up in one news outlet, journalistic attention to that source increases the likelihood that other stories will follow suit. The power of social media to affect mainstream news agendas is reflected in segments titled “What’s trending” and notations about trending topics in the chyron on the bottom of the TV screen.

Framing

Like agenda setting, framing is central to my explanation of how Russian machinations affected votes. Frames are organizing structures that “through the use of selection, emphasis, exclusion and elaboration”²⁵ tell audiences how to think about issues.²⁶ A framing effect occurs when “salient attributes of a message (its organization, selection of content, or thematic structure) render particular thoughts applicable, resulting in their activation and use in evaluations.”²⁷ Frames affect the likelihood that a particular way of seeing something will be selected by audiences.²⁸ In the process, they increase the importance of some arguments and evidence over others.²⁹ Put simply, agenda setting focuses our attention on some topics rather than others, and frames tell us how to make sense of them.

For Trump, “open borders” was a linguistic frame that encompassed disadvantageous trade, illegal immigration, menacing refugees, and Muslims who should be banned from entering the country. For Clinton, “open borders” was not preferred campaign language for a number of reasons: among them the contrast between her husband’s presidential positions on trade and her own in 2016. Unsurprisingly, when she used the phrase in speeches delivered out of press view in 2015 and 2016, she was not disposed to tie it to immigration or trade writ large but rather to working with other countries toward goals such as preventing the spread of infectious disease and incentivizing cross-border energy transfer. By adopting the Trump-primed language of “open borders” and associating it with immigration, reporters featured language and a frame native to Trump’s attacks on his general election opponent.

The terms in which journalists cast the Russian involvement in the election also penalized the Democratic nominee. As I noted in the introduction, they framed the Russian cyberactivities as “meddling” or “interference,” not as “cyberattacks,” “cyberstrikes,” or “cyberwar.” In the parlance of the legacy

media, the materials siphoned from Democratic email accounts by hackers were “leaks,” not “thefts,” and sourced to “WikiLeaks,” not the Russians. These choices obscured the perpetrator as well as that culprit’s intent.

The issues such as illegal immigration that the trolls magnified in the social media stream advantaged Trump with his target constituencies. So too did the trolls’ use of a “we/they” or “us/them” conflict frame. In dichotomous fashion, this structure embeds the assumption that “they” threaten “us.” In the imposter-created world, those who are endangering “us” include Muslims, illegal aliens, Black Lives Matter activists, atheists, demanding women, those who oppose gun rights, and Hillary Clinton, to name a few. Among those cast as “we” were white males, Donald Trump, Christians, veterans, and workers whose jobs are threatened by bad trade deals and job-stealing “illegals.”

Because both framing and priming work by making concepts salient, a natural advantage goes to the camp better able to weight the message environment inhabited by susceptible voters with messages discrediting the opponent. (Attack is not only more readily recalled than advocacy but also more likely to go viral.³⁰) By directing messages to susceptible audiences, targeted media can magnify priming and framing effects. The trolls did all of that.

In the framing process, audience receptivity matters. Consistent with the sorts of press effects Joseph Cappella and I found in *Spiral of Cynicism*, communication scholar Dietram Scheufele and political scientist Shanto Iyengar argue that “the mode of presentation of a message or piece of information will be significantly more likely to have an impact if it resonates (or is applicable) to an audience member’s mental schemas [i.e., cognitive organizational categories].”³¹ When the audience hasn’t developed the relevant schema, “framing effects are unlikely to occur.” As I will argue in a later chapter, the media and debate framing of the hacked Clinton speech segments fit the appearance versus reality and public versus private schemas regularly invoked by the press and the candidates throughout the campaign. Such alignments increase the likelihood of persuasion.

Voters Rely on Issues Primed by Messages

By influencing our sense of the importance or salience of the topics they feature, media increase the likelihood that these issues will be on the minds of

their readers and viewers when they assess candidates. In *News That Matters*, experiments by political scientists Shanto Iyengar and Donald R. Kinder demonstrate that “by priming certain aspects of national life while ignoring others, television news sets the terms by which political judgments are rendered and political choices made.”³² Work that my colleagues and I did on the 2000³³ and 2008³⁴ elections isolated such effects on voters’ evaluations of candidates as well. In 2000 our finding went like this: Fearful that doing so would link him to incumbent Bill Clinton’s impeachment liabilities, in 2000 Democratic Party nominee Al Gore failed to make the healthy economy focal to voters. Neither on the stump nor in interviews or debates was the phrase “Clinton-Gore economy” part of the vice president’s working vocabulary. Because the orphaned concept went unprimed in 2000, the Democratic ticket did not get the level of advantage from the strong economic indicators that political science models anticipated.

Since increasing our awareness of some issues over others (or in the jargon of psychologists “increasing their cognitive accessibility”) can prioritize them in voters’ assessments of candidates,³⁵ messaging that focuses the news and campaign agenda on topics congenial to one contender or uncongenial to the other can affect ballots. The missives of Russian trolls were designed to increase the salience of illegal immigration; encourage a fear of Muslims and supposed assaults on religious liberty; magnify worries about lack of respect for police, veterans, and traditional morality; heighten white voters’ awareness of civil unrest; increase black voters’ awareness of black nationalism and abuse at the hand of those in power; underscore perceptions that Clinton was dishonest and corrupt; and foster the belief that she was unconcerned about veterans, the enemy of Christians, responsible for high rates of incarceration of blacks, aligned with Wall Street, and had rigged the primaries against her Vermont rival. By priming these topics, the trolls increased the likelihood that they would be used by targeted voters to judge the relative merits of the candidates.

Our 2000 work also showed that messaging can influence perceptions of candidate traits, which can in turn affect votes. In Gore’s case in 2000, Republican ads coupled with press framing degraded public perception of his trustworthiness. We found effects on the Republican side as well. The ad-driven perceptions that George W. Bush was a “strong leader” shifted support

to him in 2000. Messaging suggesting that Barack Obama “shares my values” produced the same sort of advantage for the Democratic nominee in 2008. As his Democratic ads reiterated that theme, from June 7 to November 3, 2008, a perception that Obama shared voters’ values increased by .002 points a day for an overall increase of .3 on a 10-point scale. In 2016, the press framing of WikiLeaks’ content primed the notion that Clinton was scandal-plagued and disingenuous. In Part III, I make the case that Russian-hacked content affected the decisions of both key players and voters.

Language Can Be Primed

After being made more cognitively accessible through priming, words can shape how we think about issues, events, people, and even ourselves. So, for example, “death tax” elicits more hostility than “estate tax.”³⁶ And when individuals are primed to think of themselves as voters rather than as simply engaging in voting, they may be more likely to cast a ballot. In one study, voting increased by 10.9 percentage points among those in that first condition.³⁷

Linguistic priming was notably at play in the troll and Trump characterizations of both those in the country illegally and Muslims. Because I will illustrate the Russians’ messaging about each group in subsequent chapters, here let me simply note that the language through which we think about immigration matters. Specifically the label “illegal aliens” summons greater prejudice than “undocumented workers,” an effect some researchers attribute to heightened perceptions of threat conveyed by allying two pejorative terms.³⁸ Enwrapping immigration in a crime frame as both Trump and the trolls did elicits negative cognitive responses, increases reports that immigration is a problem, and erodes perceptions that immigration produces positive consequences.³⁹

Contagion

Agenda setting and framing can only affect voters exposed to them. By incentivizing interaction among networks of individuals, some from distant locales, social media platforms increase the spread of content with resulting

effects on attitudes and behaviors. One process involved in this chain is termed “contagion.”⁴⁰ We know that Facebook content can create a contagion effect,⁴¹ because those whose newsfeeds were manipulated to include positive or negative emotion in one large study were more likely to mirror that feeling in their own subsequent posts.

Importantly, negative emotion produces more powerful contagion effects than does the positive kind.⁴² All of this should be read in the context of Facebook investor Roger McNamee’s observation that the platform’s “algorithm exists to maximize attention, and the best way to do that is to make people angry and afraid.”⁴³ His insight draws support from evidence that emotionally arousing⁴⁴ and intense⁴⁵ content is more likely to be shared. By increasing social bonds and cohesiveness,⁴⁶ sharing content creates a positive feedback loop that drives additional distribution. Put another way, Facebook is a contagion machine built to order for many good ends but also for fake pages and posts bent on inciting and then harnessing economic anxieties and fears of cultural change. In 2016 those fears were channeled against Clinton and for Trump by the trolls.

This quick overview of priming, agenda setting, framing, and contagion does not exhaust the processes at play in political persuasion. I’ve treated them here because they play an outsized role in my model of how Russian efforts produced effects. (Readers seeking more detail on each and an expansive menu of other forces and factors affecting citizen choices might turn to the chapters by leading scholars found in the *Oxford Handbook of Political Communication*.) Pivotal to my larger argument is the supposition that such phenomena help explain why, under some circumstances, consequential communication effects do occur in US presidential elections. Accordingly, we turn next to some of the evidence that both interpersonal and mass communication can affect voters. At issue is the question: Do interpersonal and mass communication ever change votes and, if so, under what circumstances?

Interpersonal and Mass Communication Can Affect Voters and Votes

Interpersonal Communication Can Shape Voting Decisions

As the country was deciding between FDR and Wendell Willkie in 1940, the residents of Erie, Pennsylvania, were the focus of the first of the classic

Columbia multiwave panel studies of vote choice.⁴⁷ A key finding from this pioneering work has particular relevance to the social media age. The interpersonal influence that proved powerful occurred through an indirect process termed “two-step flow.” Step one involved “ideas flowing from radio and print to opinion leaders.”⁴⁸ In step two, those influentials dispatched the ideas “to the less active sections of the population.” Data from the Columbia research suggested that word-of-mouth information from trusted individuals (i.e., opinion leaders) was more likely to change the views of late deciders than was mass communication. Linking and sharing constitute the twenty-first-century version of two-step flow. Although the media reinforced existing predispositions in that 1940 study, it was the trustworthy personal communication of “opinion leaders” that affected votes. So influential was the two-step flow paradigm that one scholar proclaimed in 1968 that “few formulations in the behavioral sciences have had more impact.”⁴⁹

Fast-forward to the twenty-first century and two-step flow explains the effects of partisan as well as social media. Where the media set the agenda by featuring an issue and providing a context or frame through which to view it, opinion leaders play a key role in shaping and diffusing attitudes and behaviors about it.⁵⁰ So, for example, Fox and MSNBC influence not only those who watch them,⁵¹ but those viewers in turn function as opinion leaders who, through two-step flow, affect others with whom they interact. They do so by shaping the structure and arguments in the conversation.⁵²

Social media produce two-step-flow effects as well, including increased voting among both recipients and those in their networks. In an experiment asking whether posts on Facebook could affect turnout, researchers found that “the messages not only influenced the users who received them but also the users’ friends, and friends of friends.”⁵³ Moreover, “[t]he effect of social transmission on real-world voting was greater than the direct effect of the messages themselves.” Those who were influenced were nearly all “‘close friends’ who were more likely to have a face-to-face relationship.” This research opens the possibility that, in addition to their targets, the trolls may have influenced the friends of those whose newsfeeds their messages reached. In Part II, I will explore the notion of indirect troll effects, including those on news, in greater depth.

Ads and News Can Change Vote Intentions

At first blush, at least, the 1940s Erie results seemed to confirm that the impact of mass communication was minimal and largely indirect. Although the campaign stimulated both interest and information seeking, the Columbia sociologists found that rather than altering dispositions, it reinforced them.⁵⁴ Moreover, for most of the citizens who were tracked throughout that campaign, political communication did not initiate “new decisions” but instead solidified original intentions. Reinforcement effects can be durable. Once voters have made up their minds, most rationalize the decision. But importantly, some do shift from a once-favored candidate. Eight percent did just that in the 1940 Erie study,⁵⁵ a percentage large enough, if uniformly distributed, to change the outcome in an election as close as the Electoral College one in 2016.

Interestingly, some cross-party shifts in the Erie study were attributable to voter exposure to channels featuring the views of the other side. “Among persons with Republican predispositions *and* predominantly Republican media exposure, only 15 per cent voted for the Democratic candidate,” noted a subsequent analysis by press scholars Lee Becker, Maxwell McCombs, and Jack McLeod, “but the Democratic vote among Republicans with predominantly Democratic exposure is 47 per cent.”⁵⁶ That finding from 1940 foretells results from an ingenious study that capitalized on the natural experiment that occurred as the Fox News channel was making its way into the menus of local media markets from 1996 to 2000.

Adding that conservative outlet to the local news menu changed the media mix in these communities. It also gave conservative voices a niche in an existing media environment in which Reagan conservatism was being heralded on radio by talk-show host Rush Limbaugh and in print on the editorial page of the *Wall Street Journal*. Importantly, the arguments of Limbaugh, Fox commentators, and the *Journal* aligned.⁵⁷ This threesome created “a self-protective enclave hospitable to conservative beliefs” that “enwrap[ped] them in a world in which facts supportive of Democratic claims are contested and those consistent with conservative ones championed.” Conservative social media streams add to and amplify the messaging in legacy media as well as in newer outlets such as *Breitbart*. And as I argued in chapter 1, they do so in

a structure that increases the amount of like-minded content available to feed their audiences' basic disposition to seek out information that reinforces their existing beliefs.

The scholars studying the introduction of the Fox messaging located significant effects. After comparing the Republican vote share in 9,256 towns, divided into locales with and without access to Fox News, economists Stefano DellaVigna and Ethan Kaplan concluded that "Republicans gained 0.4 to 0.7 percentage points in the towns that broadcast Fox News."⁵⁸ Presumably Fox and other conservative outlets had the same sort of effect in 2016. But add to it the impact of being flooded with social media content reinforcing anti-Clinton themes and you open the possibility that Trump got a boost from the trolls over and above the one resulting from US-based messaging.

Notably, the researchers who studied the effects of inserting Fox News into the local media mix also found that doing so affected both "voter turnout and the Republican vote share in the Senate."⁵⁹ That impact on balloting is important because the trolls' messaging focused in part on mobilizing veterans and evangelicals and shifting Clinton votes to Stein. If changing the communication climate can increase the vote share of the favored candidate and increase turnout, and the trolls incremented up the weight of anti-Hillary, pro-Trump content, then they could have produced a similar effect.

Before proceeding, it is important to note that whether sponsored and characterized as "advertising" or not, a message is a message. What scholars describe as ad effects are actually message effects produced by a form of communication that is constrained by some legal and technical rules. These include the requirement that ads in broadcast and cable indicate a sponsoring source, be presented in preset lengths (i.e., 30 seconds, 60 seconds, etc.), and meet the technical standards of the medium.

The notion that messaging affects decision-making also draws support from political scientist Daron Shaw's study of statewide ad effects in the presidential campaigns of 1988–1996.⁶⁰ That idea was supported as well when scholars randomly altered the timing and volume of televised political ads in a gubernatorial race and then tracked voter response. Here too the ads had a discernible but short-lived impact.⁶¹

The effects of increasing the amount or weight of messaging also are clear. Using our 2000 Annenberg data, political scientists Gregory Huber and

Kevin Arceneaux found that increased exposure to ads for either Bush or Gore changed the likelihood that the National Annenberg Election Survey (NAES) panelists would support the candidate with the messaging advantage.⁶² (I will return to the notion that communication effects tend to dissipate relatively quickly, in a moment.) Similar, substantively important and statistically significant persuasion effects exist in both the cross-sectional and NAES panel data from 2000.

The evidence of impact doesn't end there. Our Annenberg study of the 2008 election not only found comparable ad effects to those isolated by these other scholars but also showed that Obama's paid messaging increased the salience of a number of messages that affected votes. These included: Obama shares voters' values, McCain was allied with unpopular incumbent George W. Bush, and Sarah Palin was unqualified to be the president. In short, campaign communication can produce agenda-setting and framing effects. Our findings also confirm that messaging not only can change the standards of judgment that voters use in evaluating the candidates but also can frame voters' understanding of the contenders, their stands on issues, and their character and temperament. In short, the amount and relative weight of messaging matter.

Mass-Mediated Debate Exposure Can Affect Votes

Although most of the time, for most viewers, debates simply reinforce existing preferences,⁶³ these face-offs play a role in my theory of Russian influence as well. Magnifying the likelihood of debate effects are three advantages that these encounters have over other forms of campaign communication: they attract a sizable number of voters from across the ideological spectrum; they give these viewers the chance to see the candidates for a lengthy period side-by-side; and, to a considerable extent, the candidates are able to frame their own messages without press mediation.

Importantly, as Nate Silver argues, "[T]here were two debates that reversed the leader in the race. Mr. Reagan, in 1980, moved ahead of Jimmy Carter following their first and only head-to-head debate on Oct. 28, and then he won overwhelmingly. In 2000, George W. Bush moved ahead of Al Gore in the polls after their first debate, and Mr. Bush won the election, although

he lost the popular vote.”⁶⁴ As political communication scholar Steven Chaffee concluded after reviewing data from the 1960 and 1976 presidential encounters,⁶⁵ debates are most likely to affect the votes of individual viewers and hence alter electoral outcomes when at least one candidate is relatively unknown, when many voters are undecided, when the contest is close, and when party ties are weak. Unsurprisingly, the contests in which some, if not most, of these conditions occurred—1960, 1976, 1980, and 2000—are the ones to which scholars turn when making the case for the electoral impact of debates.⁶⁶ As I noted earlier in this chapter, three of Chaffee’s four conditions were operative in 2016: a large number of undecided voters, a close election, and voters less loyal to party than they once were. In a later chapter, I will make the case that the second and third general election debates in 2016 shifted voters’ attitudes in a fashion consistent with the agenda and frame set by hack-reliant moderator questions.

Factors Blunting and Bolstering Communication

Although messaging can affect votes, three factors reduce the likelihood that it will alter an election’s outcome: the short-term nature of most effects, the existence of impervious audiences, and campaigns characterized by counterbalanced amounts of messaging. However, for reasons I will note, none of the three undercuts the proposition that the Russian interventions influenced votes. Here’s why.

First, as thousands of experiments have demonstrated, unless reinforced, communication effects tend to be short-lived. But short-term influence on voters who are about to ballot can matter and some effects on perception of candidate character have proven durable. Moreover, the anti-Clinton messages were consistently reinforced.

Second, most citizens are relatively impervious to campaign communication. Before the first nominating convention has been gaveled open, their party identification, sense of the economy, and evaluation of the incumbent will reliably forecast the Election Day behavior of most voters. But independents, those who are conflicted about the choice they face, and late deciders are susceptible to mobilization or demobilization and persuasion. As I argued earlier, the 2016 election had ample numbers of all three groups to swing the outcome.

Third, the impact of campaign messaging is not usually reflected in shifts in electoral outcomes because the efforts of the alternative sides cancel each other out. However, imbalances in news or decision-relevant content can produce effects. Notably, in the closing weeks of the 2016 election the social media and news communication climate in key states and national news was weighted against Clinton. With that as a preview, let me relate each factor to the 2016 landscape.

Short-Term Effects

When exposure to communication produces direct effects, they are usually short-lived. Although Shaw's study of presidential voting in statewide races found an impact that persisted for more than ten days,⁶⁷ that survival rate is the exception. In the 2000 election, political communication scholars Seth J. Hill, James Lo, Lynn Vavreck, and John Zaller drew on Annenberg data to conclude that "[t]he half-life of persuasion effects . . . is about four days. Over the six-week period of [one] study, about half of the advertising effects that survived to Election Day were due to ads from the last week of the campaign and the other half were due to the accumulation of all surviving effects from the previous five weeks."⁶⁸

Because message effects decay relatively quickly—within five weeks for some but in a matter of days for most—messaging that happens shortly before a wavering person votes has the greatest chance to shape that decision. In projecting effects, the length of time between exposure to the message and voting is crucial. Complicating matters further is the fact that, from early October through the second Tuesday in November, any day in that time frame can be Election Day in states that permit early voting. As a result, for those who have not yet made up their minds, communication during that five-or-so-week window is more consequential than that which was sloshing around the body politic at earlier points.

This state of affairs means that a ballot I cast on Thursday may be shaped by different communication than the one my husband casts a few hours or days later. A conflicted voter at noon on Friday, October 7, en route to a postal box with an absentee ballot in hand, may have been influenced by the news breaking that morning that the Department of Homeland Security

had concluded that the Russians were behind the hacking of Democratic emails. Were the same voter to delay until 4:10 that afternoon, her vote may take into account the *Access Hollywood* tape. By 6 p.m. the news agenda had reshuffled to focus on WikiLeaks' release of segments of the Clinton speeches that Bernie Sanders had tried unsuccessfully to wrestle into public view during the primaries. Were our hypothetical voter a Sanders supporter, the revelations about the hacked Democratic National Committee content may have prompted her to tear her ballot up before leaving on a long cross-country camping trip. By Sunday, the morning interview shows had created another communication context by casting the Trump *Access Hollywood* tape and the supposed Clinton speech segments as parallel breaches of public trust.

All of this matters because the widespread use of early voting means that short-term media effects potentially affected votes throughout the last month of the campaign when Russian-hacked, WikiLeaks'd content was featured in the news. I will make a case for its influence in a later chapter. The same short-term effects window also means that the headlines and stories focused on FBI Director James Comey's reopening of the Clinton server investigation on October 28 occurred within the period in which media agenda setting and framing could have altered Election Day behavior. In Part III, I will make the case that Comey's behavior affected media agenda setting in those final days. We know, as I reported earlier, that the late deciders in key states split decisively for Trump.

Importantly, not all message impacts come with an imminent expiration date. Instead, communication cues about candidate character may elicit lingering alterations in voters' perceptions. One long-lived change that occurred in 2000 was exactly the sort that plagued the Clinton candidacy in 2016. Prior to the first general election debate between Bush and Gore, Republican ads created a first effect by driving up the impression that the Democrat was dishonest. Among the messages whose influence we tracked was one that focused on a TV set on a kitchen counter, Gore on the screen. Delivered by a female voice-over, the ad's core message alleged that the Democratic Party nominee was "reinventing himself on television again." To underscore that assertion, Gore is shown saying, "I took the initiative in creating the internet," after which the unseen woman adds, "Yeah, and I invented the remote control."

Consistent with those ads, in the hours and days after the first general election debate of 2000, news framed two of Gore's misstatements as evidence of an "honesty" or "trustworthiness" deficit. The synergy between the Republican ads and that news coverage created a sustained effect. Interestingly, the perceptions of debate watchers were not the ones that changed. Instead, the persistent drop occurred among non-debate viewers exposed to media framing of the debate.⁶⁹ The shift in voter perception was consequential. "Where in September character considerations added between two and three points to his [Gore's] share of vote intentions," we concluded, "in October, they subtracted a like amount, perhaps more."⁷⁰ We noted as well that "shifts in trait perceptions were the most important single story of the campaign. They produced a dramatic reversal of fortune, induced a transition between campaign phases, and put Al Gore well behind his opponent. The reversal was largely attributable to the collapse of his reputation as a person of character."⁷¹ And in this reversal, news exposure and attention made a big difference. Richard Johnston, Michael G. Hagen, and I concluded that the change in perceptions of Gore proved resilient because they were not anchored to voters' party biases. The ability of voters to disassociate character attributions from party loyalty also was evident in 2016. In that contest, a majority of the electorate, reliable Democrats and Republicans included, held both major party candidates in relatively low regard.

A Largely Impervious Audience: Messaging Doesn't Change the Votes of Most

The second factor blunting the effects of messaging on electoral outcomes is the limited susceptibility of the voting population. No matter the message or the nominee, rock-ribbed Republicans are likely to vote their party. Die-hard Democrats are no different. In 2016, the strongest predictor of a vote for Trump was self-identification with the GOP. The most reliable forecaster of a ballot for Hillary was considering oneself a Democrat.⁷²

Party is a good predictor for a number of reasons. Most voters are armed to resist messages that counter their existing beliefs and self-identities. From the earliest decades of serious scholarship about campaigns,⁷³ scholars have "documented cognitive bias in perception of candidates' issue positions,

bias motivated by voters' own prior partisan commitments."⁷⁴ Partisan stereotyping can also deflect an otherwise persuasive message.⁷⁵ These mutually reinforcing phenomena help prompt those with strong party identification to vote for their party's candidate.

As a result of factors such as these, in most elections, so much of the vote is locked in by the end of the conventions that there aren't enough persuadable individuals left to change the outcome. Not so in 2016. For reasons I will detail in a later chapter, it was not a foregone conclusion that two reliable Republican voting blocs—evangelicals and those in military families—would turn out for Trump. Also possible was a scenario in which the rhetoric of the Republican standard bearer would incentivize turnout for Clinton by a key Democratic constituency—blacks—that gave Barack Obama a margin of safety in both 2008 and 2012. Just as Trump carried liabilities with some traditional Republican blocs of voters, so too did Hillary Clinton on the Democratic side. As an establishment candidate, she had defeated a challenge from the left by Democratic Socialist Bernie Sanders but at the cost of disaffection by his young liberal and black base. Unsurprisingly, then, as I noted earlier, in 2016 the citizenry included higher-than-average numbers of independents, conflicted voters, and late deciders—groups susceptible to agenda setting, framing, priming, the weighting of the discourse in their environment, and contagion.

Messages' Effects Cancel Each Other Out: Imbalances Create Impact

Another reason that presidential campaign communication does not alter outcomes is that the efforts of the professionals on one side blunt those on the other.⁷⁶ Because, before the era of micro-targeted communication, members of the public were exposed to messages from both sides, each message "has its effects," notes political scientist John Zaller, "but the effects tend to be mutually canceling in ways that produce the illusion of modest impact."⁷⁷

In years past, when candidates had roughly comparable access to audiences through news and debates, differentials in messaging occurred largely in advertising in mass media and, as such, were reflected in spending gaps between the campaigns. "In five cases," Larry Bartels finds, "[Republican candidates']

popular vote margin was at least four points larger than it would have been, and in two cases—1968 and 2000—Republican candidates won close elections that they very probably would have lost had they been unable to outspend incumbent Democratic vice presidents.”⁷⁸ The same research found that “[s]ince Republican candidates spent at least slightly more money than their Democratic opponents did in each of those elections, it is not surprising to find that they did at least slightly better in every election than they would have if spending had been equal.”

The clearest evidence that it is the relative balance in messaging that matters comes from the 2000 contest where we were able to isolate messaging effects by marrying our Annenberg rolling cross-sectional survey to exposure to ads and news. The results revealed that in the final week of the 2000 election, while Democratic nominee Al Gore was widening his popular-vote advantage by having the network news almost all to himself, Republican George W. Bush secured the presidency in the critical state of Florida by dominating the airwaves with ads reassuring seniors that he would safeguard Social Security.⁷⁹

At the same time, the popular vote advantage for Gore was increased by the synergy between his Social Security message in the third debate and his unrebutted reiteration of it in news in the election’s final week. That breakthrough argument alleged that Bush would shortchange Social Security by siphoning part of an individual’s payroll tax into a personal savings account. As the nightly news featured the Democrat hammering home his claim that his counterpart would reduce the solvency of a program on which seniors rely, Bush was ducking such venues to avoid questions about a just-disclosed DUI conviction in his past. In nonbattleground states, the resulting message imbalance in news advantaged Gore. Meanwhile, in the battleground, Bush’s team blunted the news effect by outspending the Democrat on ads reassuring seniors and those approaching retirement age that their Social Security benefits were safe in his hands.

The same sort of ad effect was evident in the 2008 Obama-McCain contest. After integrating a comprehensive data set of radio, TV, and cable buys into our rolling cross-sectional NAES, we confirmed that what our political science colleagues call fundamentals—specifically, an unpopular incumbent, a faltering economy, and a party-identification advantage for

the Democrats—had impressive predictive power. Indeed, these variables explained three-fourths of the variance in vote disposition. But Obama’s capacity to significantly outspend McCain on advertising also produced effects. In particular, a “100 gross ratings point (GRP) advantage for Obama in local TV advertising increased by 1.5 percent the probability that a person with a baseline probability of 50 percent would say that if the election were held on the day of the interview she would cast an Obama vote, cable produced a 4.1 percent impact, and radio, a 5.5 percent one.”⁸⁰ So, for example, the extent by which Barack Obama outspent John McCain on ads predicted voters’ belief in a central Democratic ad claim: electing the Arizona Republican meant a third Bush term. Agreeing with that conclusion significantly increased the likelihood of an Obama vote.⁸¹ Here too, as Zaller predicted, the effects of the advertised messages were related to the relative amount of messaging offered on behalf of each candidate. Of special relevance to my analysis of 2016 is the 2008 finding that the most highly micro-targeted of the three media—radio—produced the greatest effect on vote intention.

Through social cues about community sentiment, reweighting the messaging in our social environment can influence our attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors as well. So for example, a high number of views for a YouTube video signals those who are sensitive to social cues that the issue is important.⁸² Likes and comments also function as a surrogate for community sentiment. In a similar fashion, a trending item is laden with cues that suggest its acceptability. Trending topics also are more likely to elicit news coverage, a subject that I treated earlier.

By activating or suppressing our disposition to communicate, our networks, peers, and communities can shape what we share. As Elisabeth Noelle-Neumann’s theory of the spiral of silence posited, a person who embraces views that she believes are antipathetic to those widely held by others is unlikely under most circumstances to proselytize family, friends, or peers about them.⁸³ Instead that individual will probably fall silent. This tendency persists when we move online where “encountering agreeable political content predicts speaking out, while encountering disagreeable postings stifles opinion expression.”⁸⁴ The importance of this phenomenon will become clear in later chapters, which will argue that by amplifying anti-Clinton

and pro-Trump messages in swing states, the Russian impersonators and hackers helped create a communication climate more hostile to Clinton than it otherwise would have been.

How Russian Machinations Could Have Affected Voters

By noting consistencies between the trolls' activities and what scholars know about effective fear appeal, I foreshadowed the way in which I will use past research to inform my analysis of the plausible impact of the Russian operatives. My inference that the Russian interventions mattered is grounded in the fit between their messaging (and its demonstrable impact on the media, debates, and behaviors of key actors) and the relationships between similar stimuli and effects found in scholarship about past contests. Where this chapter telegraphed what scholars know about campaign effects, in subsequent ones I will argue that Russian-originated or stolen communication affected media agenda setting and framing, reweighted the message environment in news and social media, primed and reinforced anti-Clinton content, capitalized on timing consistent with short-term effects, and relayed and created content designed to mobilize and demobilize key constituencies. Here let me briefly weave these central concepts into a preview of the narrative I will advance in later chapters.

1. *Agenda setting and framing.* Not only did media reports on the hacked content set in place topics and frames antipathetic to Clinton's interests, but they also primed attributes damaging to her candidacy. Moreover, as I will show in detail in a later chapter, two days before a presidential debate when the *Access Hollywood* tape briefly was colonizing the media agenda and Trump's lewd language on it was initiating a contest to see whether his remarks would be framed as a "confession of sexual assault" or as "boys-will-be-boys locker-room banter," WikiLeaks'd Russian hacking redirected the media agenda. Displaced in the process was the DHS and ODNI conclusion that the Russians were behind the hacking. In place of coverage that would have juxtaposed the intelligence report against the *Access Hollywood*

tape was framing that counterposed the tape against the newly released stolen speech segments. In short, the release of Russian-stolen Clinton speech segments shifted the media landscape from one focused on Trump's proclivities and the reasons the Russians might be happy to see him elected to one concentrating on the vulnerabilities of both candidates. From October 28 to November 6, the reopened Comey investigation had a similarly powerful effect on the media agenda. Reporting on WikiLeaks'd stolen emails and press speculation about what Comey would find on the laptop of the estranged husband of a top Clinton aide matter for the same reason. Primed content affects voters' assessments of candidates.

2. *The weighting of the message environment.* By injecting negative information into the discourse stream through WikiLeaks, the Russians weighted the informational environment with topics (e.g., disclosure of possible inconsistencies, suspect dealings, and wrongdoing), framed in a language of "revelation" that primed negative attributions to which Clinton was susceptible. Contributing to the tilted message environment was the news' and debate's crediting of the hacked content to "WikiLeaks" or to leaks rather than to Russian espionage, cyberattack, or theft. Adding to the mix was the assumption that the "leaked revelations" were newsworthy, even scandalous. Moreover, reporters' truncation of a hacked speech segment advantaged Trump in a key debate. By driving the trending of topics, Russian trolls also increased the likelihood that anti-Clinton hashtags and memes would infiltrate mainstream news coverage.

Meanwhile, in social media, Russian trolls and bots reweighted the communication environment in their networks by increasing the visibility of existing anti-Clinton messages and heightening perceptions that content congenial with their aims was "liked" and "shared." If past research provides an accurate forecast, these amplifications increased the likelihood that nontrolls would post stories (some accurate, others not) that were hostile to the Democrat. Meanwhile, the recipients of the trolls' posts

would overestimate the extent and extremity of anti-Clinton sentiment in their communities. One predicted result would be increased communication against Clinton and a drop in messaging supporting her. Because people who are frequently exposed to a piece of information tend to accept it as true, another effect of increasing exposure to content is increasing belief in its accuracy.⁸⁵ (Although scholars have called this phenomenon “illusory truth,” when mentioning it in later chapters, I will refer to it simply as a familiarity effect.)

3. *Reinforcement.* When an indictment is a persistent part of the communication stream, burnishing it and boosting its weight in decision making are easier tasks than trying to create a new impression. Reinforcement ups the likelihood of effects. When fresh WikiLeaks’ “disclosures” kept Clinton “revelations” in the news and coverage of the reopened FBI investigation elicited multiday coverage and conjecture, the suspicions and negative attributes that each primed were reinforced. The trolls and the Trump campaign then harnessed the WikiLeaks and Comey agenda setting and the framing of each to their appeals to both “lock her up” and to spread hashtags and memes urging “Hillary4Prison.” Because the social media platforms are built to create and sustain like-minded communities, the Russian trolls were more likely to reinforce than change minds. Mobilization is, of course, a process built on reinforcement.
4. *The effects window was open.* As this chapter’s brief journey through studies of past campaigns suggests, if it matters at all, most communication is likely to elicit small, short-term effects. Unsurprisingly, central to my model of Russian influence is the fact that the messaging on which I am focusing occurred during the period in which early voting was taking place. Election Day also fell within the window in which reinforced priming of negative attributes has produced shifts in vote intention in the past. We know that on Election Day the trolls urged the users whose sympathies they had cultivated to ballot against Clinton or

for Trump. Short-term stimuli aside, recurrent priming of negative candidate traits is able to produce longer-term influence. This is the case because such evaluations are more likely to be made apart from party considerations. At the same time, negative information is more readily recalled. And, of special note, it is difficult to restore personal credibility. Attack was the trolls' *modus operandi*.

5. *Susceptible voters existed.* A sufficiently large number of susceptible voters were making up their minds during the last month to affect the outcome of a close election. In key swing states, the results were driven by late deciders. Those who were the object of troll attempts to mobilize and demobilize were potentially susceptible during this window as well.

Importantly, two signals that could have elicited an anti-Russian backlash went unsent in 2016. Confident that his heir apparent would be elected and reportedly concerned that voters would see a public presidential condemnation as election meddling of his own, incumbent President Barack Obama did not speak out. Nor did the media cast the October 7, 2016 confirmation by the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) and Office of the Director of National Intelligence (ODNI) that the Russians were behind the hacking in a "we-they," "democracy vs. enemy state," or "cyberattack" news frame. Had the press reports on WikiLeaks' content focused public attention on the source of the stolen content and its probable electoral intent, its negative effects on Clinton's candidacy would have been minimized if not blunted entirely.

Before asking what we don't, can't, and do know about the plausible effects produced by the Kremlin-tied spies and saboteurs, I will outline the hurdles that the trolls and hackers had to jump to influence the electorate. The trolls needed to diffuse social media content that was consistent with Trump's message, aligned with his electoral needs, persuasive, and well targeted. By contrast, the challenge for the Russian hackers was shaping the media and debate agendas as late deciders were making up their minds in the final month of the election. The two efforts were of course interlaced. Determining how and how well they succeeded are my tasks in Parts II and III of this book.