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Russian Internet Trolls Obsessed Over Trump—and a Canceled Comedy Show

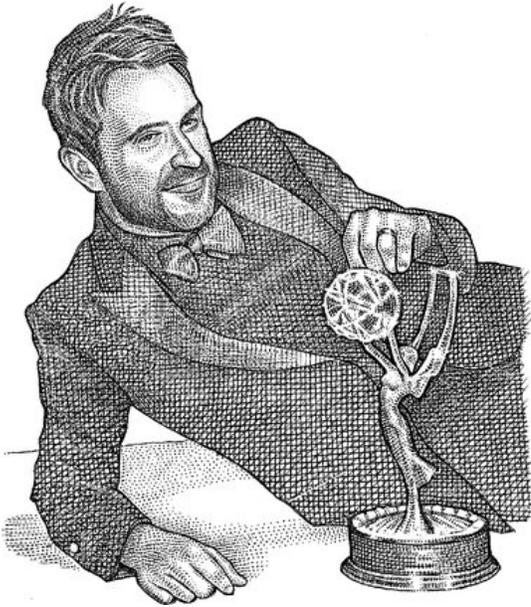
Trolls tweeted about politics, but their other favorite subject was Comedy Central's now-defunct @midnight

By *Georgia Wells and Rob Barry*

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Everybody knows Russian trolls love U.S. politics.

But did you know they also really like the canceled Comedy Central game show @midnight with Chris Hardwick?



The internet-themed improv show aired in New York late at night and early in the morning St. Petersburg time. It discussed topics trending on social media and encouraged fans to tweet funny phrases in response to a given Twitter hashtag.

When the topic was #EarthDaySongs, one troll tweeted: “Stand by Your Manure.” For #OlympicTV, another said, “Better Call Seoul.”

Twitter Inc. recently released the first comprehensive accounting of the activities of the Kremlin-aligned Russian organization called the Internet Research Agency, which showed the @midnight account was one of its favorites—

mentioned more than 13,000 times, according to a Wall Street Journal analysis.

That’s more than double the mentions through tweets and retweets Russian trolls gave to @HillaryClinton, a handle they called out just under 6,000 times, Twitter’s data shows.

President Trump’s Twitter account, @realDonaldTrump—the English-language handle they wrote to most—was mentioned 23,000 times.

While @midnight was on the air, it developed a loyal following particularly among young men, and peaked with 485,000 viewers in late 2016. Comedy Central discontinued it in 2017 because its performance was flagging.

The host, Mr. Hardwick, says he didn’t know he had developed a niche following in St.

The comedy show @midnight discussed topics trending on social media and encouraged fans to tweet funny phrases in response to a given Twitter hashtag. Here are some of the Russian responses.

- #CowTV: America's Next Top Moodel
- #SexyStarWars: I like big lightsabers and I can not lie
- #DogSongs: Who Let Me Out
- #SexySports: Brittany Spear Fishing
- #ConspiracySongs: I heard it through the grapevine, or maybe it was the microchip they implanted in my ear
- #OlympicTV: Narcs and Recreation
- #MakeABookWarm: As I Lay Frying
- #MakeABookWarm: To Grill a Mockingbird
- #ConspiracySongs: Pretty Fly For A Russian Spy
- #FashionSongs: Pleat It

Petersburg until he was contacted by the Journal.

“I feel like the Russian trolls let us down,” Mr. Hardwick said. “They can get a guy in the White House but they can’t keep a Comedy Central show on the air?”

It wasn’t for lack of trying. One of the trolls’ most popular tweets was in response to the prompt #RedneckAMovie. The tweet “Y’all Come Back to the Future, Ya Hear?” got more than 140 likes. On the topic #MarriageAdviceIn3Words, the reply “Order your fries”—possibly a reference to spouses who don’t like to share—was retweeted 174 times.

When asked for suggestions for #RichMovies, they wrote:

“Fortune 500 Days of Summer.”

“The Empire Strikes Oil.”

“Something’s Yacht to Give.”

Many of the trolls’ attempts at humor seemed to miss their mark, perhaps because something was lost in translation.



Comedian Yakov Smirnoff in 1986. PHOTO: MARIO RUIZ/ZUMA PRESS

In response to the hashtag #CountryMusicIn5Words, one troll wrote “exorcism is my part-time job.”

Some posts appeared to be inside jokes. “Hello, it’s Putin,” one account tweeted in early 2017. “Trump—From Russia, With Love,” another said around the same time. For #BadMonsterMovies, another weighed in: “Internet Trollhunter.”

The trolls may have been just hitting their stride as the show neared its end.

For one of the last episodes, which featured a bit called #MakeTVShowsCanadian, Russian trolls tweeted nearly 200 times at the @midnight account.

Some of the entries included “Leave it to Bieber”; “The Eh Team” and “The Price Is Right....About 80 Cents on the Dollar.”

Internet Research Agency trolls work desk jobs, churning out social-media posts at great volumes with defined strategies for targeting specific audiences, according to U.S. criminal indictments and accounts by Russian reporters.

To reach their goal of creating as much agitation as possible, they were required to hit the same divisive topics over and over again. In the U.S., that included the border wall, guns, Black Lives Matter and the debate over NFL players kneeling for the national anthem.



@midnight host Chris Hardwick. PHOTO: COMEDY CENTRAL/EVERETT COLLECTION

People connected to the IRA have previously denied ties to election interference efforts. Moscow has denied any government effort to influence the 2016 election.

“We don’t have anything to share here,” a Twitter Inc. spokesman said when asked about the large number of tweets the Russians sent at the game show. Twitter has pulled handles connected to

IRA from its platform.

The motivation of the trolls talking to the @midnight account is a mystery. One theory is that they were trying to learn to be funny—in English.

Over time, the troll factory’s best-performing Twitter accounts used memes and jokes to build their vast followings, and to do this they needed to learn what made Americans tick. Social-media researchers say their tweets to the @midnight show may have been an effort to learn American culture and sharpen their humor.

“If you’re going to be funny, you have to practice,” said Ben Nimmo, who researches disinformation and online influence for nonpartisan think tank the Atlantic Council. He also suspects they might have been bored. “It’s not a lot of fun being a troll.”

The tweets at the comedy show appeared to give them a little creative license, even if few of them went anywhere close to viral.

There is perhaps no greater expert on Russian-American humor than Yakov Smirnoff, the Soviet-born comedian who emigrated to America in the 1970s.

Mr. Smirnoff says his career took a hit with the end of the Cold War. After the Soviet Union collapsed, late-night host David Letterman read a top 10 list of things that would change, Mr. Smirnoff said.

“Number one on the list: Yakov Smirnoff will be out of work,” he said. “I thought it was very funny. Six months later, it was not funny.”

At the Journal’s request, Mr. Smirnoff, 67, reviewed some of the trolls’ attempts at humor.

“Nothing I see makes me go, ‘Ooooh, I wish I thought of that,’” he said. To the trolls, he offered this advice: “Don’t quit your day job, whatever you’re doing.”

Comedy Central doesn’t seem to have been aware of the show’s popularity in Russia.

“We knew about their interest because the @midnight tech team was tracking and trolling the St. Petersburg bots for years,” joked Kent Alterman, president of Comedy Central.

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