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U.S.

# Russian Operation Targeted U.S. Business Owners

Operatives posed as digital marketing startup to take control of businesses' social-media accounts

By *Shelby Holliday and Rob Barry*

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The Russian operation to influence Americans through social media included an effort to persuade business owners to buy into a marketing campaign and turn over private information, an examination by The Wall Street Journal found.

The effort was fronted by Russian operatives posing as a savvy Los Angeles-based startup called Your Digital Face. The group recruited American business owners as customers, and for a monthly fee, promised to post snappy marketing content on the business owner's social-media pages and score them thousands of new followers. Their main contact was a man who claimed to be named Yan Big Davis, the business owners told the Journal.

In reality, the outfit appears to be an arm of the Internet Research Agency, the St. Petersburg troll farm charged in a federal indictment in February with interfering in the U.S. election, according to a Journal analysis of email, PayPal, Skype and social-media accounts used by the group. And Mr. Davis appears not to be who he claimed.

The operation brought suspected IRA agents into closer contact with U.S. businesses than previously known, and it used those businesses to make its network of fake accounts seem legitimate. Working with real Americans allowed the Russian trolls to "eliminate the detection and exposure risk of inauthentic personas," said one of two Senate-commissioned reports on the IRA released this week.

At least one of the group's U.S. customers was later visited by Federal Bureau of Investigation agents seeking to unravel the scheme.

The marketing operation's success was illustrated in the two recently released Senate-backed reports. Though they didn't name Your Digital Face, the reports found one of the group's promotions, by an account called @blackstagram\_\_, was the IRA's most-liked post on Instagram between 2015 and 2017.

The existence of Your Digital Face's website was reported earlier by the Daily Beast. The Journal's analysis provides new details of how the group operated.

In addition to working in the U.S. and Russia, Your Digital Face also operated in Iran, China, Vietnam, the United Arab Emirates and Cuba, according to a person at a number connected to the group. The group took control of social-media accounts, posted advertisements and deployed software designed to add followers, this person said, adding that he didn't know who ran the group and wasn't aware of any links to the IRA.

Subsequent messages to Your Digital Face weren't returned.

Your Digital Face promoted U.S. businesses using accounts now known to have been operated by the IRA. Several had more than a hundred thousand followers on Instagram, including @sincerely\_black\_, @afrokingdom\_ and @\_black\_business.

The group had other links to the IRA as well. The email address it used to collect PayPal payments was revealed by special counsel Robert Mueller in February to have been used by the IRA, as was another email address linked to the group. An account in Mr. Davis's name on Tumblr, a social blogging service, was shut down because it was part of the IRA campaign.

After the Journal inquired about Your Digital Face, Instagram said it reviewed the service's activity and determined the behavior violated the platform's terms of use and "would also be considered spam."

Lawyers for Concord Management and Consulting LLC, one of the entities charged in connection with the IRA, didn't respond to a request for comment. The Russian government has denied allegations that it interfered in the U.S. political system.

Your Digital Face's pitch to business owners was simple: "Don't waste your precious time on managing your social accounts," its website said. "We will take care of your Instagram for you." To do so, it asked clients to hand over their login credentials and IP addresses, according to records provided by one customer.

The group's services were promoted by Mr. Davis, who represented himself as an Atlanta-based activist, social-media specialist and freelance journalist. His email account has been deactivated by Google, and attempts to reach him by telephone and Skype, which shows his location as "Russian Federation," were unsuccessful.

The Journal interviewed more than a dozen American business owners who communicated in 2016 and 2017 with Mr. Davis, who also claimed to be involved with several black activist groups. Some said they declined his pitch for a marketing package, which cost about \$300 a month. Others said they bought promotional posts on an individual basis for roughly \$15-\$30 each.

The activist groups Mr. Davis claimed to be affiliated with, such as Black Matters and Black4Black, were also connected to the IRA, according to information from congressional investigators.

Former intelligence officials say such a marketing scheme could have been used to map out business networks. "If I'm in the business of getting you followers, every time I get you a follower, I know that follower myself. Now I can really take the pulse of what's going on in a particular area," said Mark D. Young, a cyber expert formerly with the U.S. Department of Defense.

Steven Austin, a Pennsylvania T-shirt vendor whose company sells apparel featuring progressive messages, began paying Your Digital Face a monthly fee for social-media marketing in May 2017.

"We have connected thousands of black businesses to help them," Mr. Davis wrote Mr. Austin. "Your page will naturally grow and get 2-3 thousand followers each month."

At first, Mr. Austin was pleased. "Their content was relevant. It was actually pretty good," he said. "I had no idea how to do marketing at all and I got about 5,000 followers on Instagram just from them."

The group soon knocked it out of the park with the viral post, the @blackstagram\_\_ one noted in the Senate reports, which mentioned Mr. Austin's company, Expression Tees, and garnered more than 250,000 likes on Instagram.

Two days later, Mr. Davis emailed Mr. Austin to brag about the campaign's success. He offered a 20% discount—"just for you"—of up to 30 additional promotional posts for \$180.

After a few months, red flags cropped up. Mr. Austin said Instagram warned him his account was being accessed by computers all over the world, and Mr. Davis kept asking for new login codes Instagram was sending to Mr. Austin's cellphone, according to screenshots provided by Mr. Austin.

Last December, Mr. Austin cut ties with the group.

This August, two FBI agents showed up at Mr. Austin's house. They wanted to know how many payments he'd made to Your Digital Face. Mr. Austin said they called it a "victim notification." A spokeswoman for the FBI declined to comment.

The FBI may be looking at Your Digital Face's interactions with Americans as part of its attempt to counter foreign influence in the U.S., said a former senior law-enforcement official familiar

with those efforts.

While Your Digital Face's English-language website went dark in recent months, its Russian-language site continued this month to showcase Expression Tees as one its featured accounts.

*—Lisa Schwartz contributed research to this article.*

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