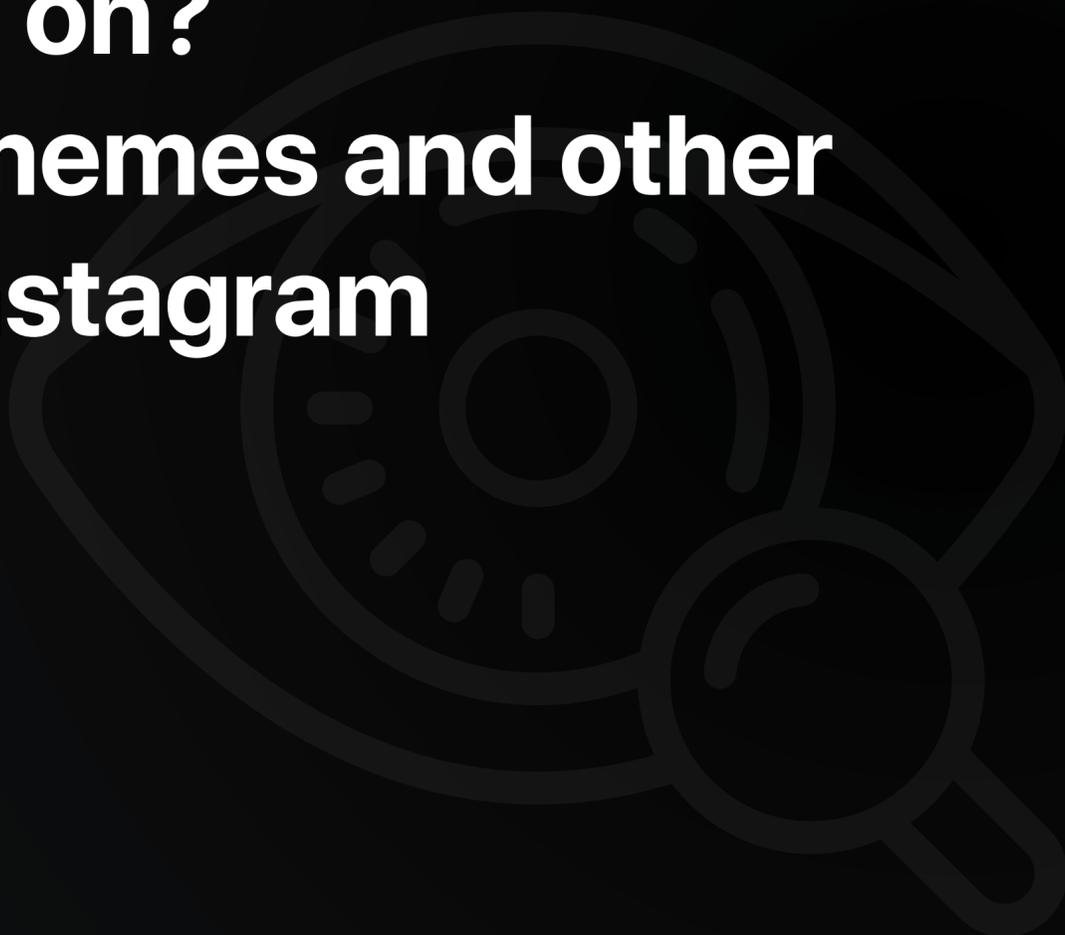




# What's going on? Anti-Trump memes and other oddities on Instagram



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United States-Italy May 13, 2019

# 1.

## INTRODUCTION

Last June Instagram reached 1 billion monthly active users and has sought to ramp up its e-commerce efforts and its reach throughout the world. However, this exponential growth comes with its own set of problems. The social media platform seems a top destination for counterfeit products and fake luxury goods<sup>1</sup>: last April our GhostData team produced an extensive report on this topic. Before that we also studied in detail Instagram's growing bot issue (2018)<sup>2</sup>, with as many as 95 million bots posing as real accounts on its platform. And in 2017 we explained how the Islamic State supporters were sharing their propaganda<sup>3</sup> on a then new feature called "Stories".

It should be noted that Instagram and its parent company Facebook, along with other major e-platforms, are seriously stepping up the fight against counterfeiting. Important security steps have also been implemented to stop the proliferation of bot accounts, while online IS propaganda has virtually disappeared. But Instagram remains an engagement powerhouse<sup>4</sup> in the world social media scene and therefore we decided to investigate a new, disturbing trend that is seemingly emerging among its users.

This time we focused on a dataset comprising ~350 Instagram accounts whose content is scorning, mocking or generally negative about Donald Trump. We further identified a subset of 19 suspicious accounts that appear to lead such dataset in this posting activity, and analyzed their network content activities, user profiles and related features. Even if it is impossible to differentiate between clickbait strategies and sincere political outrage, our data shows that a certain number of accounts are directly linked to each other and even operate in a coordinated fashion to spread these anti-Trump memes.

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<sup>1</sup> "Scammers have turned Instagram into a showroom for luxury counterfeits", NBC News

<https://www.nbcnews.com/tech/tech-news/scammers-have-turned-instagram-showroom-luxury-counterfeits-n997256>

<sup>2</sup> "Instagram's Growing Bot Problem", The Information <https://www.theinformation.com/articles/instagrams-growing-bot-problem>

<sup>3</sup> "Islamic State backers find ephemeral platform in Instagram", Associated Press

<https://www.apnews.com/97119155ed934ad9ad438890a29828a2>

<sup>4</sup> "Instagram is an engagement powerhouse", Axios

<https://www.axios.com/top-facebook-twitter-instagram-accounts-interactions-1550456097-439fdbe1-33c1-42be-a8d4-189c1899a6bb.html>

Considering the growing attention gained by political campaigns and tactics carried on social media platforms, including great loads of misinformation, fake news and other oddities, we produced a limited but thorough analysis of this trend currently emerging on Instagram. Our study should be intended as an informative contribution within a larger context that includes, for example, possible “digital operations” and strategies to encourage discord and amplifying distrust in our democracies.

As detailed here below, we gathered a variety of data about the on-going activities of these suspicious accounts in order to provide a comprehensive picture of certain memes, their origin and potential outcome. Most importantly, it is our hope that this study could trigger larger research projects addressing such crucial topics.

## 2.

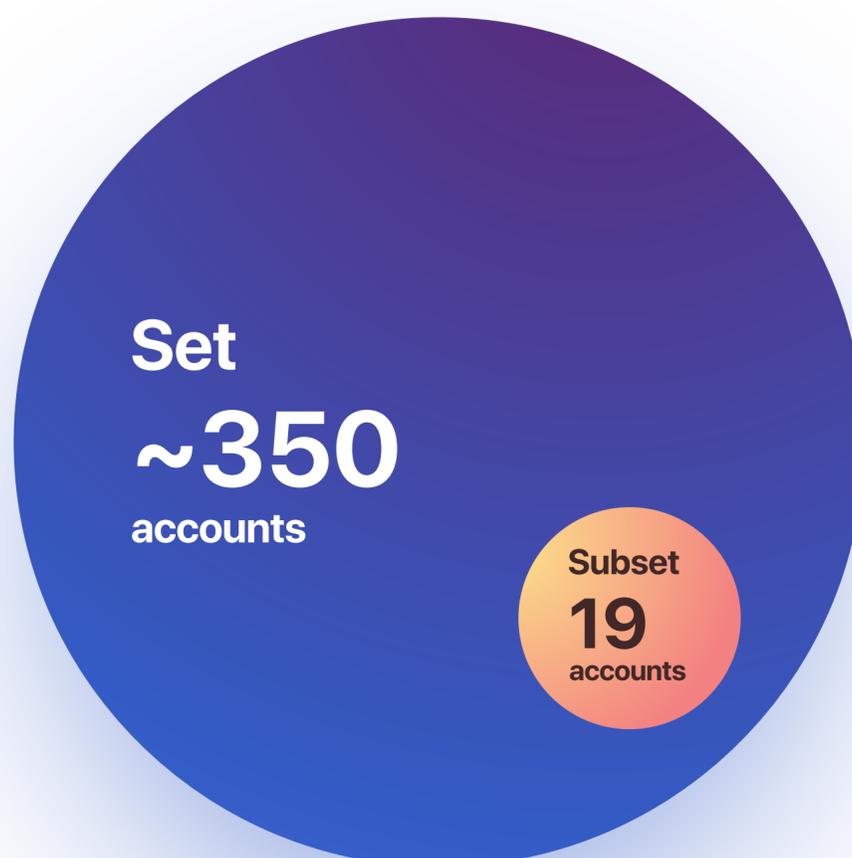
### BASIC KEY FINDINGS

	General dataset	Subset
Users	~350	19
Total posts published since their launch	121051 (October 2016 to May 10, 2019)	3249 (August 2018 to May 10, 2019)
Total interactions	35.2M+	440k+
Interactions for March-April 2019	3.9M+	227502

### 3.

## INITIAL DATASET AND FOCUS

We started by identifying 52 105 Instagram accounts publishing a variety of posts scorning, mocking or generally negative about Donald Trump, using such hashtags as #fucktrump, #LiarInChief, #ImpeachTrump[...]. We further refined our target with manual and automatic filtering, thus focusing on ~350 suspicious accounts almost entirely devoted to posting content against or satirizing Donald Trump.



These accounts combined published a total of 121 051 items (pictures, videos) generating over 35.2M+ interactions (likes, comments). Even if a few initial posts date back to October 2016, most accounts started posting only recently and their activities swelled dramatically in the past two months.

## 4.

### **PRIMARY GOALS OF OUR RESEARCH**

Based on this general dataset, we primarily focused on accounts sharing similar features, activities and contents. In particular, our team analyzed their operational tools, techniques, and tactics, while keeping track of subsequent memes and interactions.

This approach provided an accurate picture of such broader trend and suggested the possibility of a coordinated social media operation – even if, to be clear, we did not set out to expose any “digital operation” but we rather focused on gathering a large set of data and providing behavior and content analysis on those suspicious users.

## 5.

# ACTIVITIES OF SUSPICIOUS ACCOUNTS

### #1

DumpChumpVote<sup>5</sup> started posting on August 7, 2018 and is often promoting t-shirts featuring Trump wearing a prison uniform, available for sale on “Gear Bubble”<sup>6</sup>, an e-commerce platform for people lacking any online experience. Up to mid-May 2019 this Instagram account has published over 600 manipulated/juggled pictures with crude jokes about Trump.

Since launching on March 18, 2019 DumpChump<sup>7</sup> has published almost 250 posts and its top pictures are identical to the ones posted by DumpChumpVote. Actually, the two accounts now appear synchronized and publish the same content a few seconds/minutes after each other, as shown in the following log screenshot (CEST):

dumpchump	2019-05-07 19:06:31
dumpchumpvote	2019-05-07 19:07:12

A Facebook page called “Dump Chump”<sup>8</sup> (a “political organization” with 5 likes) features the same profile picture of DumpChumpVote on Instagram. It sponsored 25 Facebook ads for selling t-shirts and other gadgets mostly with sarcastic images of Trump and other GOP politicians<sup>9</sup>, particularly targeting New York, Michigan, Washington, Colorado, California.

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<sup>5</sup> <https://www.instagram.com/dumpchumpvote/>

<sup>6</sup> <https://www.gearbubble.com/>

<sup>7</sup> <https://www.instagram.com/dumpchump/>

<sup>8</sup> <https://www.facebook.com/Dumpchump-349062395636476/>

<sup>9</sup> “Ad Library Facebook”, Facebook

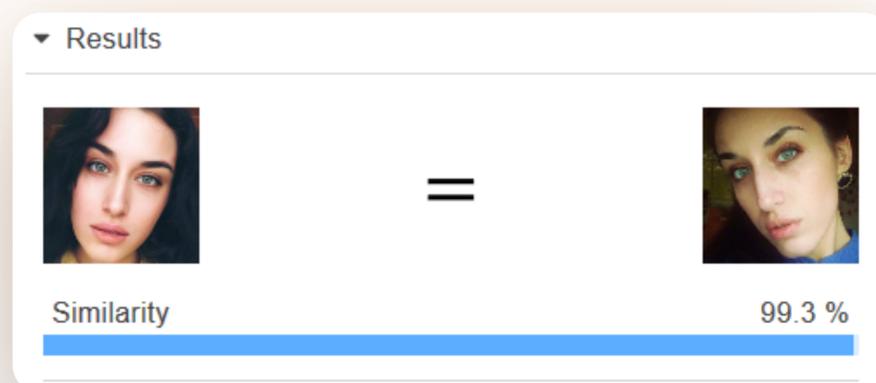
[https://www.facebook.com/ads/library/?active\\_status=all&ad\\_type=all&country=US&q=Dumpchump&view\\_all\\_page\\_id=349062395636476](https://www.facebook.com/ads/library/?active_status=all&ad_type=all&country=US&q=Dumpchump&view_all_page_id=349062395636476)

## #2

Launched on November 21, 2018 on Instagram, so far Emmamiller71<sup>10</sup> published over 420 items: some images and Stories are about her daily life as a young US girl, but most of them are actually memes attacking Trump and his policies.

In a similar fashion, since January 1st, 2019 Reesewrightt<sup>11</sup> started posting images about herself but soon switched to the same jokes and caricatures about Trump (for a total of 345 posts).

Both accounts display pictures taken from other people profiles. A quick reverse image search reveals that Emmamiller71 bio picture actually is Tatyana Suslova's<sup>12</sup> while Reesewrightt picture is taken from Ajna Arslan. We could not locate an identical photo for Reesewrightt, but we found photos of the same subject dating back to 2013-2014. Most likely, whoever is impersonating Ajna Arslan has access to more recent photos. In any case, various comparison tests with Microsoft Azure<sup>14</sup>, Face++<sup>15</sup>, Amazon Rekognition<sup>16</sup> show the same person.



<sup>10</sup> <https://www.instagram.com/emmamiller71/>

<sup>11</sup> <https://www.instagram.com/reesewrightt/>

<sup>12</sup> <https://vk.com/tverner95>

<sup>13</sup> <https://vk.com/id198774770>

<sup>14</sup> "Face API - Facial recognition software", Microsoft <https://azure.microsoft.com/id-id/services/cognitive-services/face/>

<sup>15</sup> "Face Comparing", Face++ <https://www.faceplusplus.com/face-comparing/>

<sup>16</sup> "How to Detect Analyze and Compare Face - Amazon Rekognition", Amazon <https://aws.amazon.com/it/getting-started/tutorials/detect-analyze-compare-faces-rekognition/#>



Another suspicious Instagram account is Lindadiazzzz<sup>17</sup>: since February 24, 2019, the vast majority of its 130 post are crude jokes and memes against Trump. In this case we couldn't find any reverse image matching this account profile picture, but many images are clearly reposted from DumpChump<sup>18</sup> and other accounts linked to our subset.

<sup>17</sup> <https://www.instagram.com/lindadiazzzz/>

<sup>18</sup> <https://www.instagram.com/p/BxKmJI7BayW/>

To further suggest a direct link among these accounts, it is worth noticing that on May 7, 9 and 10 Lindadiazzzz and Resewrightt published Stories within a few seconds/minutes from each other (see images and log screenshot below, CEST).

2019-05-07 21:45:24

2019-05-09 09:53:15

2019-05-10 15:07:26

2019-05-07 21:45:00

2019-05-09 09:50:24

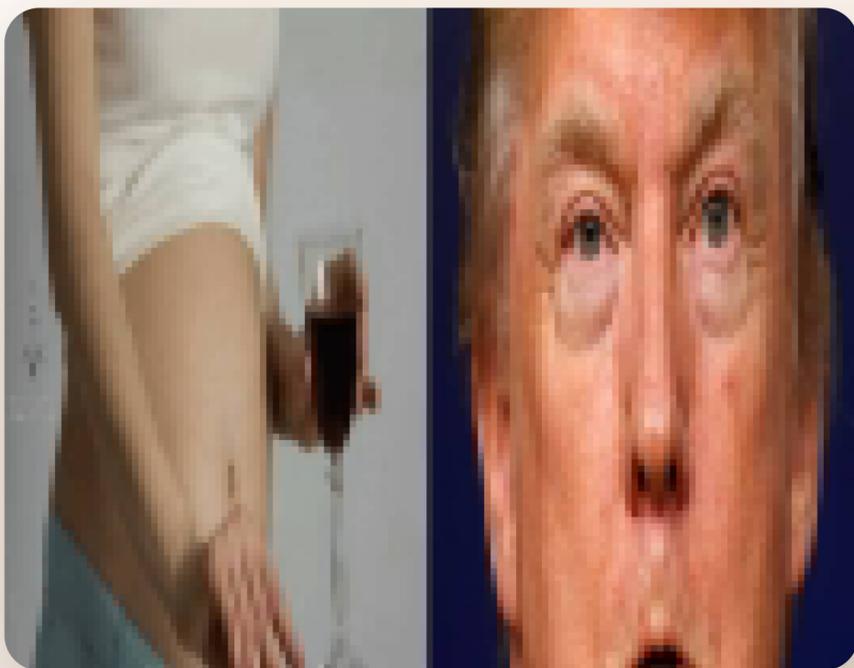
2019-05-10 15:06:44



Stories from Lindadiazzzz and Resewrightt on May 7



Stories from Lindadiazzzz and Reesewrightt on May 9



Stories from Lindadiazzzz and Reesewrightt on May 10

<sup>17</sup> <https://www.instagram.com/lindadiazzzz/>

<sup>18</sup> <https://www.instagram.com/p/BxKmJI7BayW/>

### #3

On August 9, 2018 five different accounts of this kind started posting on Instagram: Trumpgotohell\_<sup>19</sup>, \_ihatetrump<sup>20</sup>, \_antitrump<sup>21</sup>, \_hatetrump<sup>22</sup>, Donaltrumpanti<sup>23</sup> (see log screenshot below, all times in CEST).

donaltrumpanti	2018-08-09 06:51:07	2018-08-31 13:50:42
_hatetrump	2018-08-09 06:15:45	2018-08-31 12:51:07
_antitrump	2018-08-09 06:01:25	2018-08-31 13:55:53
_ihatetrump	2018-08-09 05:52:34	2018-08-31 15:00:57
trumpgotohell_	2018-08-09 05:49:11	2018-08-31 12:48:52

All these account mostly posted similar or identical content and featured other similarities in their nickname combination. Most importantly, they were activated and turned off the same day.

### #4

Same story on March 4, 2019, when three different Instagram accounts started posting almost at the same time (see log screenshot below): Never\_Trump<sup>24</sup>, Tuck\_frump\_daily<sup>25</sup>, Dump\_trump\_us<sup>26</sup>.

dump_trump_us	2019-03-04 22:06:38
tuck_frump_daily	2019-03-04 22:06:40
never_trump	2019-03-04 22:05:01

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<sup>19</sup> <https://www.instagram.com/trumpgotohell/>

<sup>20</sup> [https://www.instagram.com/\\_ihatetrump/](https://www.instagram.com/_ihatetrump/)

<sup>21</sup> [https://www.instagram.com/\\_antitrump/](https://www.instagram.com/_antitrump/)

<sup>22</sup> [https://www.instagram.com/\\_hatetrump/](https://www.instagram.com/_hatetrump/)

<sup>23</sup> <https://www.instagram.com/donaltrumpanti/>

<sup>24</sup> [https://www.instagram.com/never\\_trump/](https://www.instagram.com/never_trump/)

<sup>25</sup> [https://www.instagram.com/tuck\\_frump\\_daily/](https://www.instagram.com/tuck_frump_daily/)

<sup>26</sup> [https://www.instagram.com/dump\\_trump\\_us/](https://www.instagram.com/dump_trump_us/)

Again on March 5, 2019, these five accounts started posting on Instagram almost simultaneously (see log screenshot below): Trump\_sucks\_us<sup>27</sup>, Trump\_lie\_us<sup>28</sup>, Anti\_trump\_us<sup>29</sup>, Lier\_trump<sup>30</sup>, Hate\_trump\_us<sup>31</sup>.

hate_trump_us	2019-03-04 01:40:29
lier_trump	2019-03-04 01:40:27
anti_trump_us	2019-03-04 01:40:26
trump_lie_us	2019-03-04 01:40:25
trump_sucks_us	2019-03-05 01:40:16

Finally, on March 22, 2019 a new Instagram user (Trumpshit\_us<sup>32</sup>) started posting by joining the same timeline and content of the above mentioned accounts.

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<sup>27</sup> [https://www.instagram.com/trump\\_sucks\\_us/](https://www.instagram.com/trump_sucks_us/)

<sup>28</sup> [https://www.instagram.com/trump\\_lie\\_us/](https://www.instagram.com/trump_lie_us/)

<sup>29</sup> [https://www.instagram.com/anti\\_trump\\_us/](https://www.instagram.com/anti_trump_us/)

<sup>30</sup> [https://www.instagram.com/lier\\_trump/](https://www.instagram.com/lier_trump/)

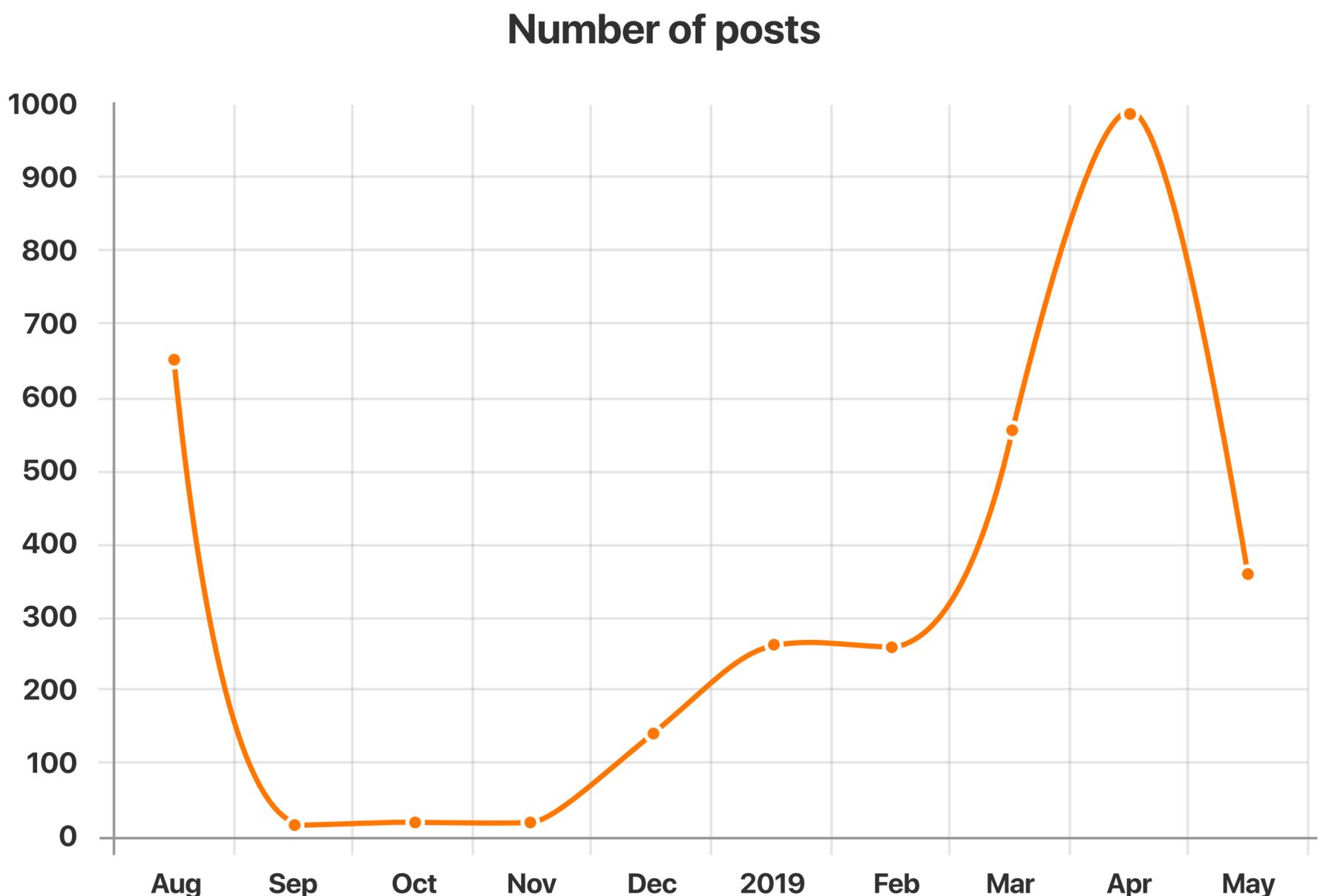
<sup>31</sup> [https://www.instagram.com/hate\\_trump\\_us/](https://www.instagram.com/hate_trump_us/)

<sup>32</sup> [https://www.instagram.com/trumpshit\\_us/](https://www.instagram.com/trumpshit_us/)

## 6.

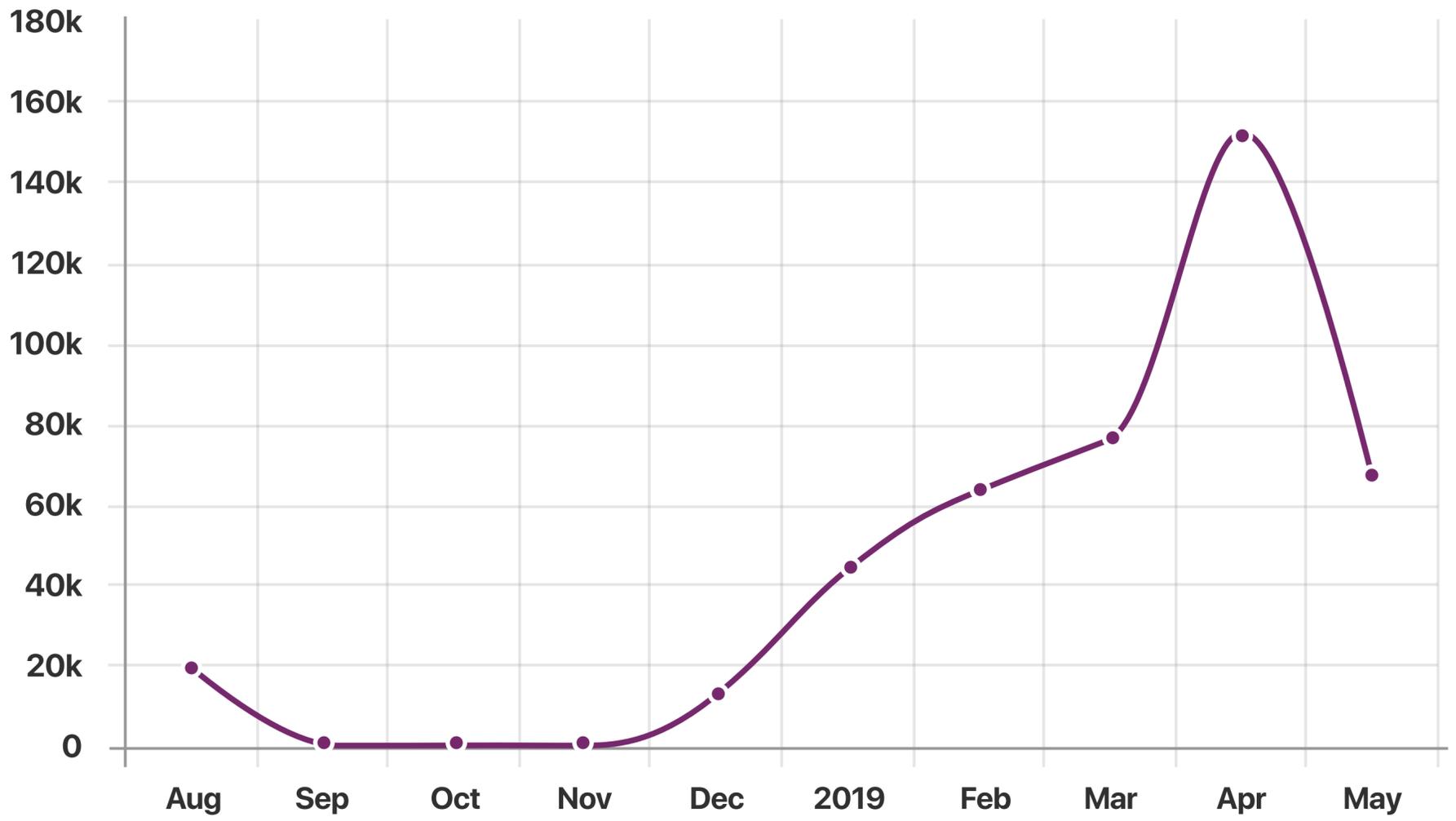
### TIMELINES OF MONITORED ACCOUNTS

Here below is a chart detailing overall content posted by the 19 Instagram accounts monitored by our study. The timeline covers the period from August 2018 to May 2019 (up to May 10). A peak is evident for the month of April 2019, with a total of 981 posts.



The following chart shows the interactions (likes+comments) produced by the same 19 suspicious accounts up to May 10, 2019. They gained 11 246 followers, while the total of their interactions amount to about 440 000 with a peak of 150 461 in April 2019. Their interactions are actually growing exponentially: in the first 10 day of May 2019 they gained 69 222 likes and comments combined. Also, group #4 received over 380 000 video views since launching in August 2018.

# Interactions



## 7.

# CONTENT ANALYSIS AND VISUAL RECOGNITION

We analyzed a total of over 102 000 images published by the initial dataset. This large quantity could suggest some sort of “memetic warfare”<sup>33</sup>, a battle based on memes, images and short videos that run smoothly on Instagram. Even more so, in this case we face a collection of sarcastic and offensive content, fake news and partial information, incitement to hatred and violence. It could easily amount to “hate speech” and therefore could be reported and possibly removed from the platform. However, our goal here is limited to study the behavior of some Instagram users and to validate their activities with carefully-gathered data. As underlined in our conclusions, this study aims at providing a general picture of certain campaigns and tactics proliferating on major social media platforms, thus raising crucial questions to be addressed in future studies with larger scope and reach.

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<sup>33</sup> Memes That Kill: The Future Of Information Warfare”, Cbinsight  
<https://www.cbinsights.com/research/future-of-information-warfare/>

# Topic: William Barr Testimony on Mueller Report



Elaboration: photoshop, imgflip.com, [...]



We used Google Vision to extract texts from the images for 108 605 posts, out the 121 051 total posts published by the 350 accounts of our initial dataset. We further applied caption analysis on those images with an additional OCR analysis on 84 299 images.

Out of those 108 605 posts, about 3 688 are re-posts. Even if Instagram does not have a "share" button as on Facebook, ad-hoc apps like Regrann and Repost let users repost photos and videos. This way it is easy to uncover a direct connection between different accounts. However, we should be aware that, lacking Instagram any tracking option similar to the "share" button on Facebook, it becomes quite difficult to find out where a content is originally coming from and how many people did actually see it.

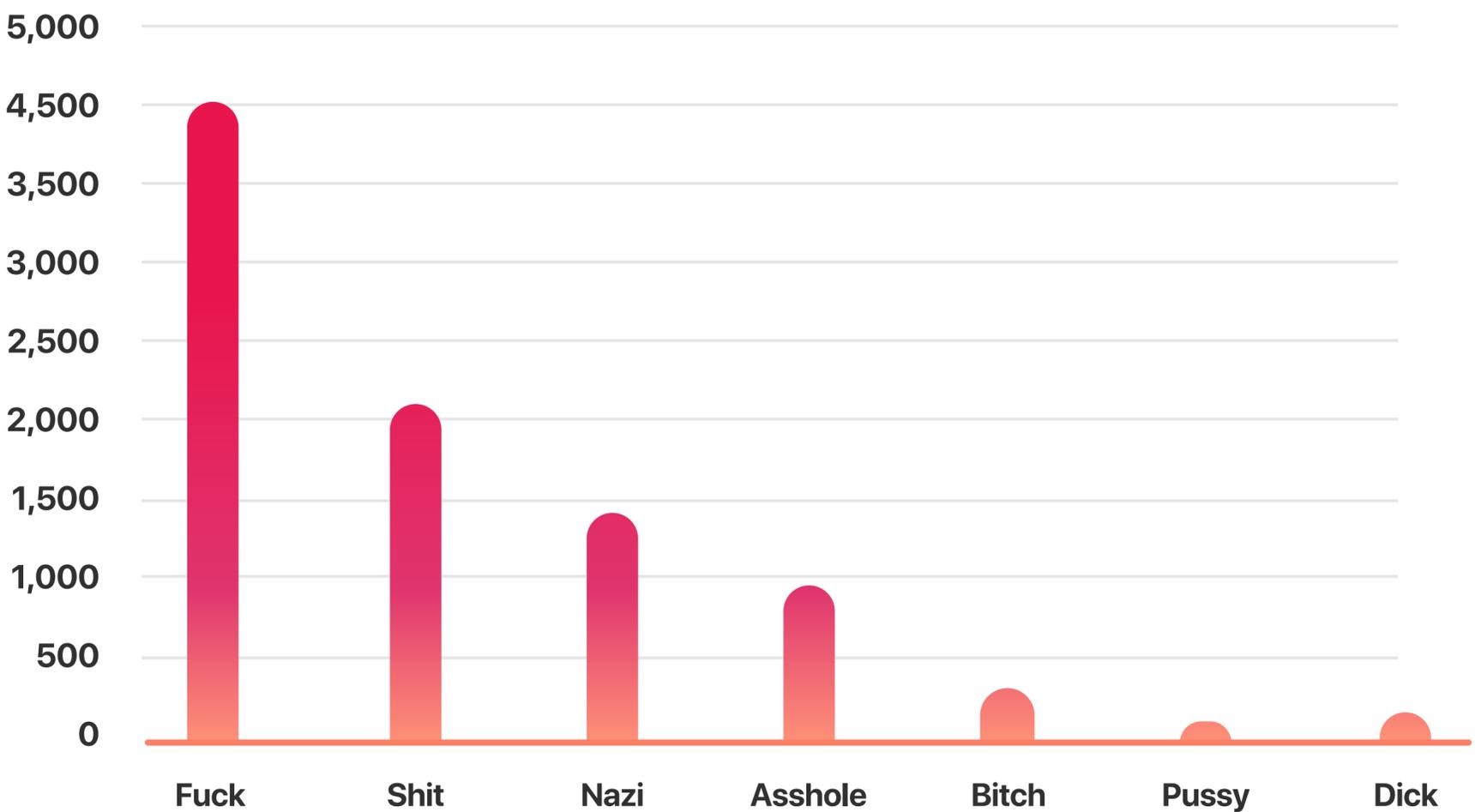
We also discovered that, out of the total 84 299 images just mentioned, about 253 images are actually memes put together with imgflip.com, a simple website specialized in creating and sharing memes and GIFs. Only six of them have been created with memecrunch.com, a similar meme generator app and website.

## 8.

### CAPTION AND LANGUAGE ANALYSIS

Here below is a chart detailing the most used words in those images. It is worth noticing that many captions are violent and offensive, probably qualifying as "hate speech". We did not fact-check them nor we know if this is a "hate" campaign. As mentioned in our conclusion, our main goal was to study a suspicious behaviour by certain Instagram users and carefully gather all related data.

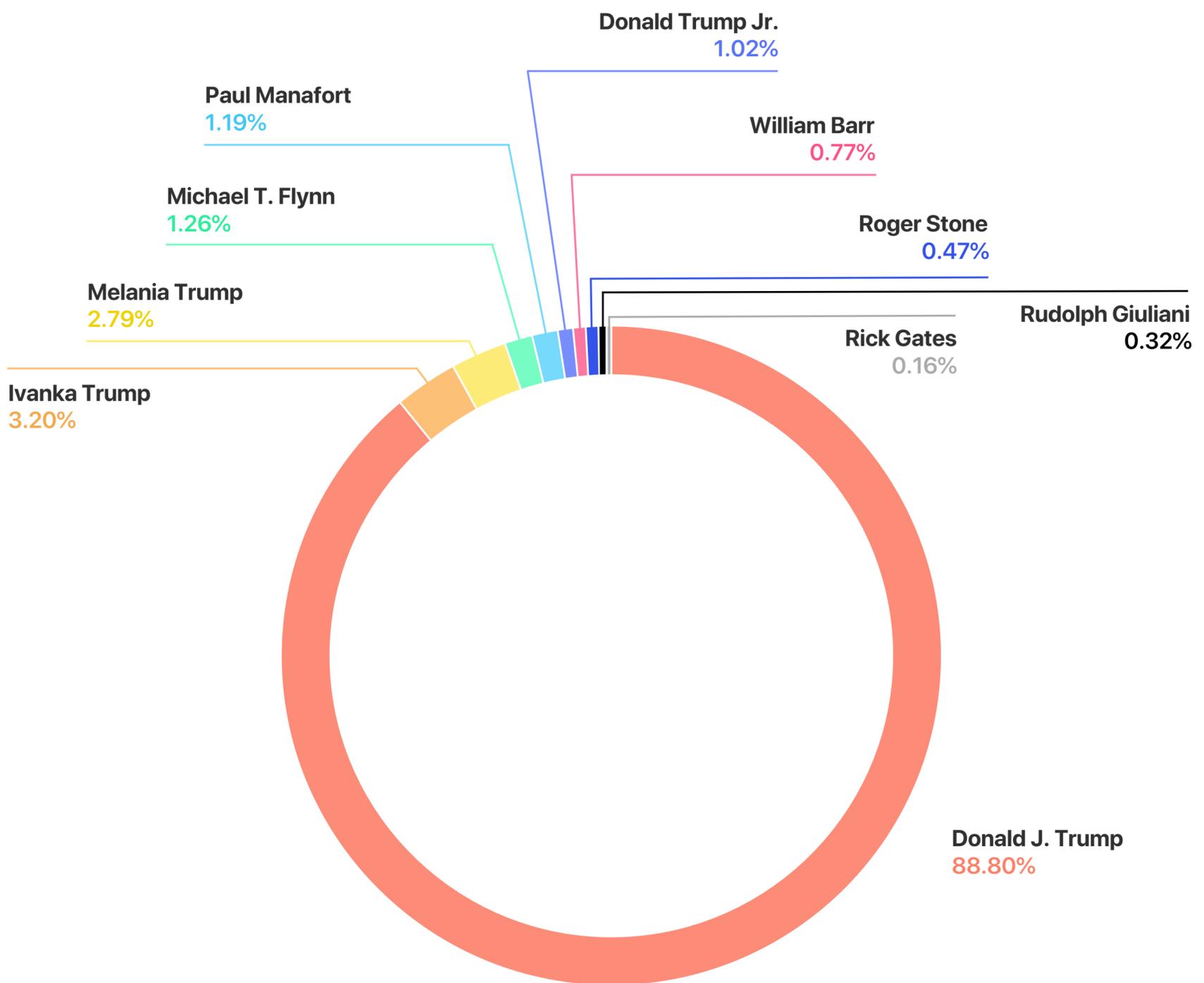
**Bad words, Ranking**



## 9.

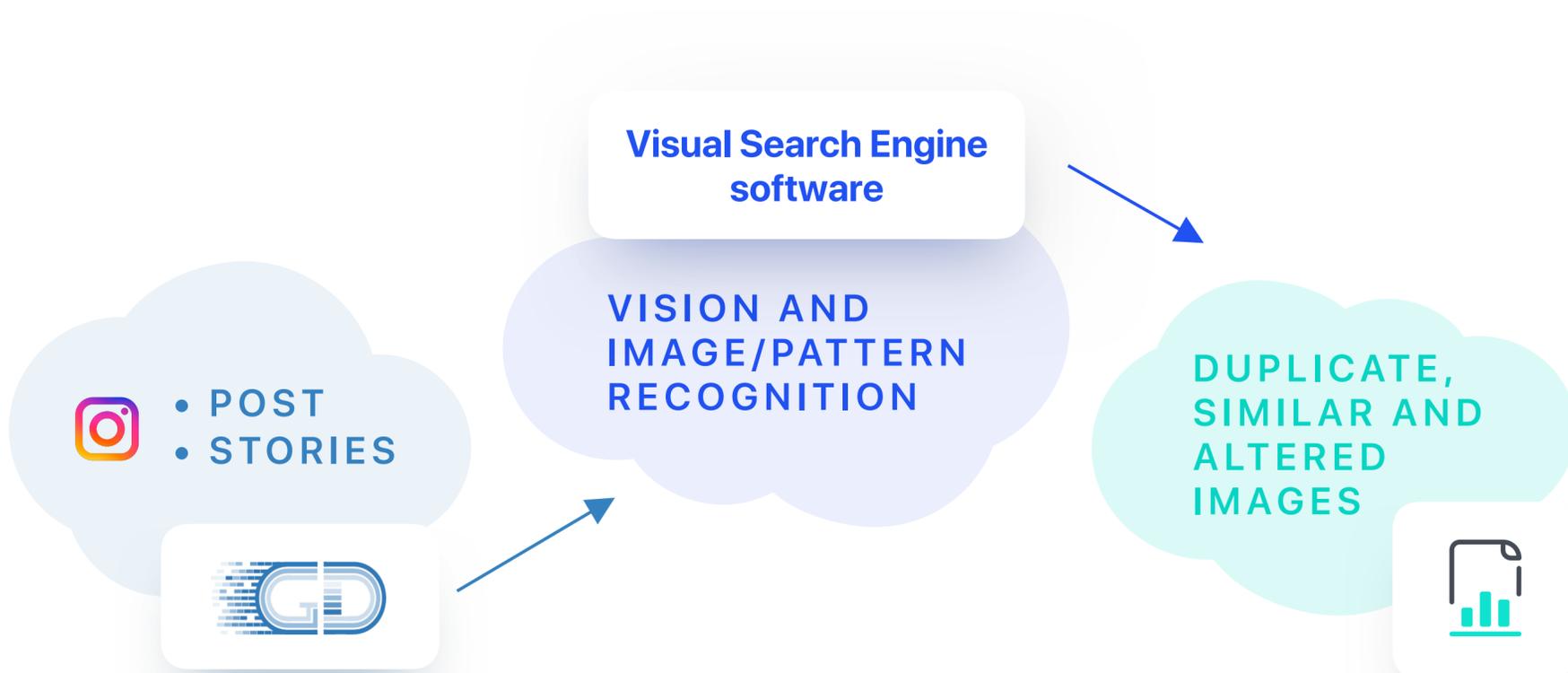
### TOP 10 MOST MENTIONED PERSONS

As is fairly obvious from the various images included in this study, Donald Trump is the person mentioned most often in the entire dataset images (almost 89 per cent). In a far distant second place is Ivanka Trump with 3.20 per cent. Here below is a graph detailing the top 10 most mentioned individuals.



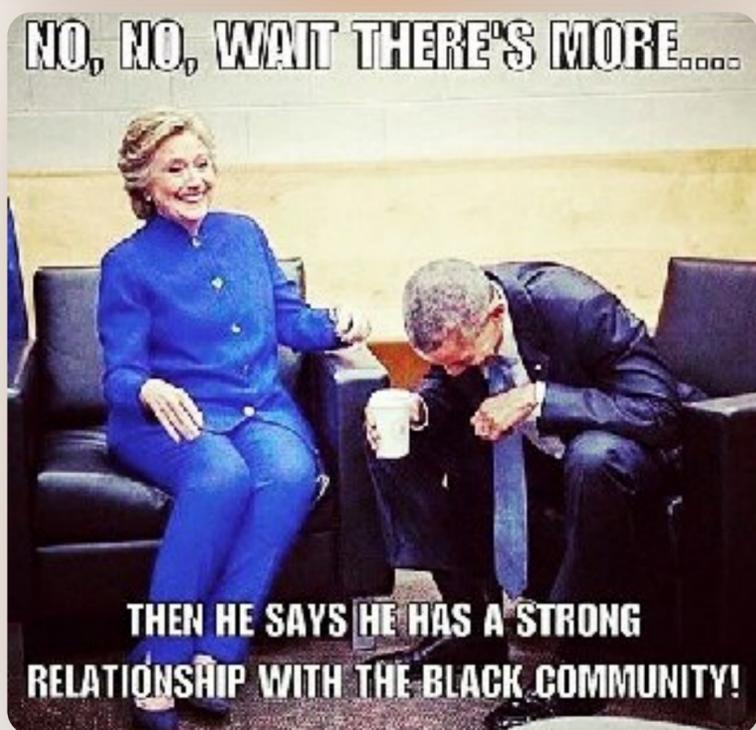
## 10.

### MEME ANALYSIS



We used a visual search engine for images that quickly finds duplicate, resized and modified images against our own image collection.

Thanks to this software, we had a better understanding of the processing work behind those memes – that is, we were able to locate duplicates of same images and any meme derived from an original meme (with variations in color, dimensions or added/changed captions). Here below are a few examples of this kind of cross-posting:



A further analysis on meme contents will be provided by our partner LogoGrab in a separate report.

Within the posts published by the subset of 19 suspicious accounts, we found 6029 instances of such cross-posting with a score over 50 and a match over 70 percent (ie., very similar images, slightly altered, resized or with different filters). All posts published by these 19 accounts share at least once the same content published by the general dataset (~ 350 users), under the characteristics just described (similar, equal, or derivative).

#1

On February 26, 2019 at 02:23 (all times are in CEST), wefuckinghatedonaldtrump<sup>36</sup> posted the following image (since launching on February 28, 2016, this account alone received more than 7.7M interactions):



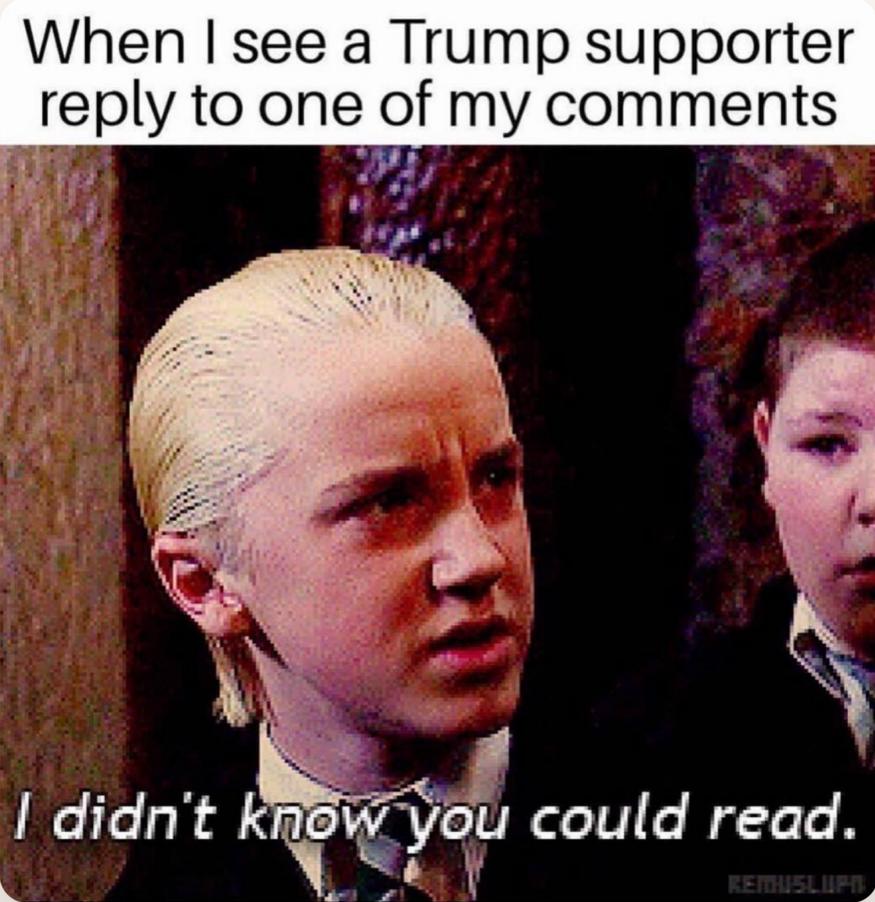
On February 27, 2019 at 15:33, emmamiller71 posted the same content with a minimal alteration:



<sup>36</sup> <https://www.instagram.com/wefuckinghatedonaldtrump/>

#2

On April 27, 2019 at 04:13, wefuckinghatedonaldtrump published the following image:



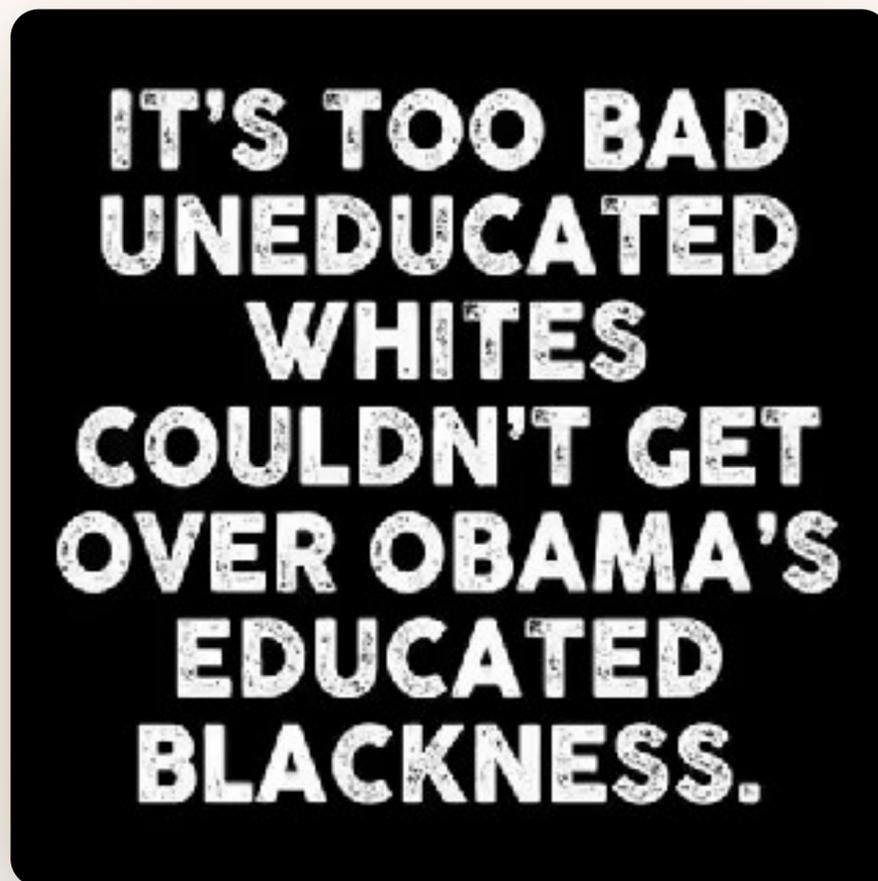
On the same day at 22:56 Reesewrightt reposted<sup>37</sup> the same exact content.

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<sup>37</sup> <https://www.instagram.com/p/Bwxe7-dBBMk/>

#3

On April 13, 2019 at 19:15, trump\_sucks\_us posted this image:



On April 15, 2019 at 01:40 wefuckinghametrump published the same post. In this case we noticed that this image originated by another account, standingupfordemocracy<sup>38</sup>. Indeed, the trump\_sucks\_us post is actually a repost and standingupfordemocracy is mentioned as the image "owner". The standingupfordemocracy account is not included in the general dataset monitored by our study.

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<sup>38</sup> <https://www.instagram.com/standingupfordemocracy/>

#4

On April 25, 2019 at 18:34, Trumptrash<sup>39</sup> posted this image (since launching on March 22, 2016, this account alone received about 3.9M interactions):



On the same day at 20:36, Lindadiazxxx reposted the same exact content.

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<sup>39</sup> <https://www.instagram.com/Trumptrash/>

#5

On December 1, 2018 at 02:49, dumpchumpvote posted the following image:



On December 8, 2018 at 23:30, Trumptrash posted the same content with a slightly different filter and framing:



#6

On January 15, 2019 at 20:19, Trumptrash posted the following image:



The following day, January 16, 2019 at 17:12, reeswrightt posted the same content with a slightly different filter and framing:



#7

On May 4, 2019 at 15.07, Progressist\_Feminist\_Resist<sup>40</sup> posted the following image:



The same exact image was published by Trump\_Shit\_Us two minutes later, May 4, 2019 at 15.09.

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<sup>40</sup> [https://www.instagram.com/progressive\\_feminist\\_resist/](https://www.instagram.com/progressive_feminist_resist/)

#8

On March 26, 2019 at 16.16, ProtestDonald<sup>41</sup> posted the following image:



Four minutes later that same day (March 26, 2019 at 16.20), Trumpshit\_us published the same image. As for the example #3, this image<sup>42</sup> was originally posted by another account, Bitches.Of.Karma<sup>43</sup>, which is not included in our general dataset. Bitches.Of.Karma appears to be very active on a daily basis, and on that same day, March 26, 2019, his posts received a total of 11 300 interactions.

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<sup>41</sup> <https://www.instagram.com/protestdonald/>

<sup>42</sup> [https://www.instagram.com/p/BvdM4IAhs\\_a/](https://www.instagram.com/p/BvdM4IAhs_a/)

<sup>43</sup> <https://www.instagram.com/bitches.of.karma/>

#9

On August 18, 2018 at 16:28, Donaltrumpanti posted the following image:



One minute later on the same day, August 18, 2018 at 16:29, \_lhatetrump posted the same image with a slightly different filter, As mentioned above, both accounts belong to same "network".



**#10**

On April 12, 2019 at 2:47, fallen2345<sup>44</sup> posted the following image:



The same image was then published on the same day (April 12, 2019) by several other accounts: impeachnow<sup>45</sup> at 4:35 (CEST TIME), stopdumptrump<sup>46</sup> at 17:19, trumpchicken45<sup>47</sup> at 17:47, richmond\_usa<sup>48</sup> at 17:58, spursgirlie<sup>49</sup> at 21:29, whyishepresident<sup>50</sup> at 22:35, Lier\_trump at 22:44, and Antitrump\_us at 22:52.

That same image was also published on the following day (April 13, 2019) at 3:02 by 45cheeto<sup>51</sup>. And again: on April 14, 2019 at 14:51 by imp\_the\_donal<sup>52</sup>; on April 15, 2019 at 2:02 by impeachtheloser<sup>53</sup> and at 05:21 by prodemaparty<sup>54</sup>; on April 16, 2019 at 7:45 by the\_anti\_trump\_movement<sup>55</sup>; on April 18, 2019 at 7:45 by trumpisameme<sup>56</sup>.

<sup>44</sup> <https://www.instagram.com/fallen2345/>

<sup>45</sup> <https://www.instagram.com/impeachnow/>

<sup>46</sup> <https://www.instagram.com/stopdumptrump/>

<sup>47</sup> <https://www.instagram.com/trumpchicken45/>

<sup>48</sup> [https://www.instagram.com/richmond\\_usa/](https://www.instagram.com/richmond_usa/)

<sup>49</sup> <https://www.instagram.com/spursgirlie/>

<sup>50</sup> <https://www.instagram.com/whyishepresident/>

<sup>51</sup> <https://www.instagram.com/45cheeto/>

<sup>52</sup> [https://www.instagram.com/imp\\_the\\_donal/](https://www.instagram.com/imp_the_donal/)

<sup>53</sup> <https://www.instagram.com/impeachtheloser/>

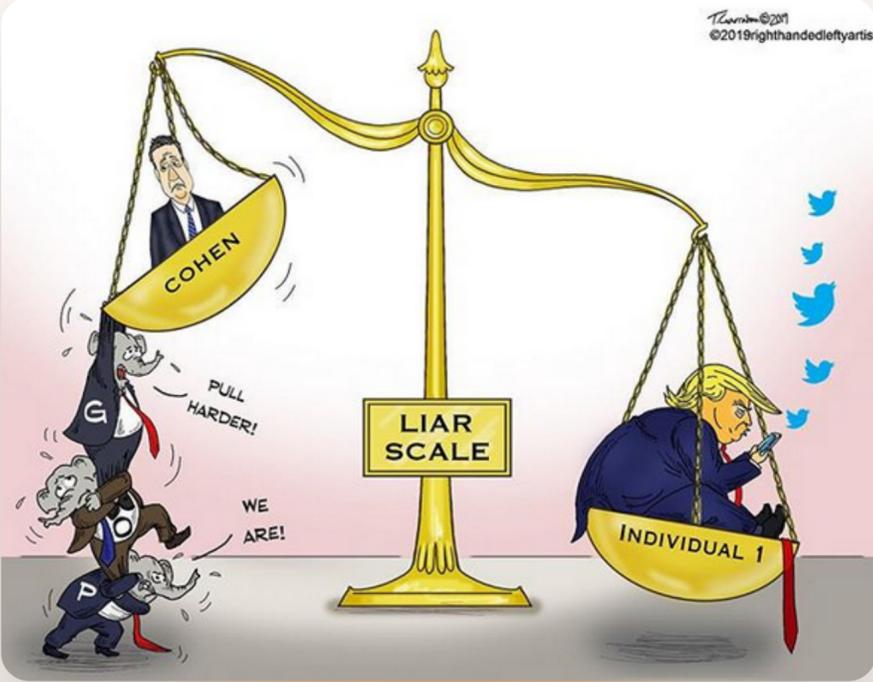
<sup>54</sup> <https://www.instagram.com/prodemaparty/>

<sup>55</sup> [https://www.instagram.com/the\\_anti\\_trump\\_movement/](https://www.instagram.com/the_anti_trump_movement/)

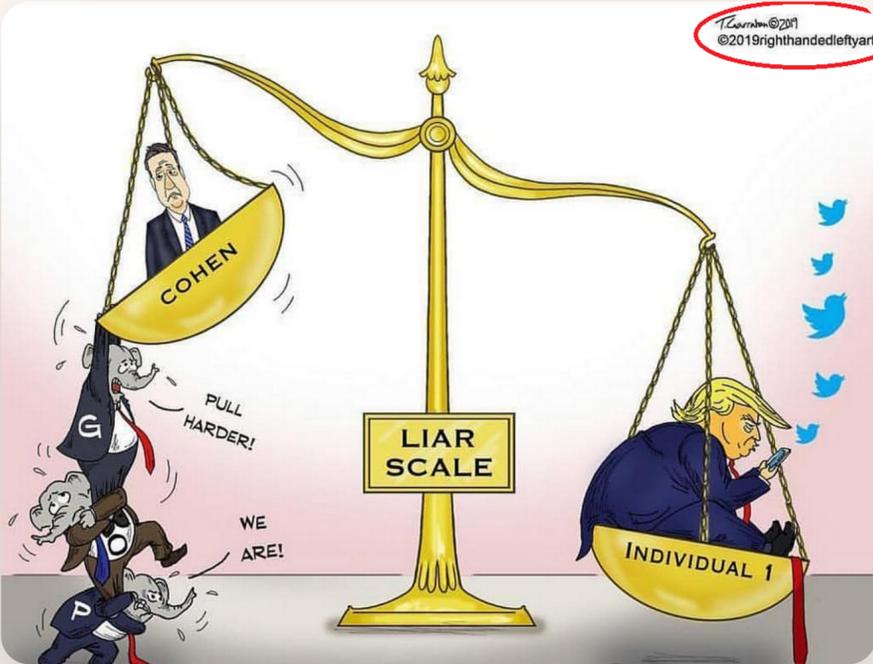
<sup>56</sup> <https://www.instagram.com/trumpisameme/>

#11

On February 28, 2019, righthandedleftyartist<sup>57</sup> created and published the following image:



On the same day (February 28, 2019) at 16:17 Reeswrightt posted the same image with a slightly different framing:



On the same day (February 28, 2019) at 16:26 the same image appears under the 45cheeto profile (since launching on August, 17, 2016, this account alone received about 160 000 interactions), but through a repost by righthandedleftyartist.

<sup>57</sup> <https://www.instagram.com/righthandedleftyartist/>

#12

On January 7, 2019 at 1:26, Emmamiller71 posted the following image:



On the same day (January 7, 2019) at 1:49, Dumptrumpsrump<sup>58</sup> published the same image (since launching on December 10, 2017, this account alone posted over 4 600 items and received almost 2M interactions).

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<sup>58</sup> <https://www.instagram.com/dumptrumpsrump/>

## 11.

### MAJOR FINDINGS

Our study focused on a dataset comprising ~350 Instagram accounts whose content is scorning, mocking or generally negative about Donald Trump. We further identified a subset of 19 suspicious accounts that appear to lead such dataset in this posting activity. We analyzed their network (following/followers), content activities (post, Stories, number of likes, number of comments), user profiles and related features. We deployed a variety of techniques and tools, including network analysis, visual recognition, text extraction from images (OCR), reverse image search and other content analysis.

As shown above, in most instances one of these accounts starts publishing certain pictures which in turn are quickly shared by the other accounts. In other occasions, the opposite is true. This means that all these accounts closely follow each other or that they are somewhat direct linked. Moreover, it seems that both their posting activities and their ability to generate interactions are rapidly increasing.

In particular, most content shared by these users is identical, while other images are slightly altered in size, colors, filter, partial or missing text. Many identical or similar posts are published a few minutes apart from each other, while some are even weeks apart. Most importantly these combined posts generated over 35.2M+ interactions (likes, comments) – 3.9M of them just in the last two months.

We also found more Instagram users posting mostly or exclusively negative memes about Donald Trump. However, they are not included in our dataset, but are simply mentioned in those re-published images. In other words, there are good chances that our study exposed just the proverbial tip of the iceberg.

Obviously, it is impossible to differentiate between clickbait strategies and sincere political outrage. But even within a limited scope of our study, our data shows that a certain number of accounts are directly linked to each other and even operate in a coordinated fashion. We cannot definitely say that a widespread digital operation is taking shape on Instagram, but certainly there is a concerted will to quickly spread certain memes of a certain kind – even if it is anybody's guess for what purpose.

## 12.

### CONCLUSIONS

Why a dataset of Instagram users is now sharing such controversial content against Donald Trump? Is this the initial stage of a wider digital operation or just honest political dissent? Are we facing a first step of a concerted strategy to further spreading disinformation, encouraging discord and amplifying distrust among social media users? Even if those accounts do not appear to be automated or part of a botnet, is there some sort of “mastermind” behind their coordinated activities? Are there more Instagram users involved in these activities? And what is the final goal or motivation of similar “experiments”, if there is one? Last but not least, can we trust Facebook’s cybersecurity policies to ensure an overall security on its platforms and to promptly get rid of fake accounts/news or suspicious behaviours<sup>59</sup>?

Of course these issue are not limited to Instagram or Facebook. Other sources have pointed out that, instead of creating new content themselves, certain online users prefer just to amplifying other people’s memes. This way they could simply hide behind somebody else with whom they agree on certain content. Also, malicious hacker could break into computing devices and then use these hacked devices to create on social media platforms many legitimate-looking accounts, including followers and interactions<sup>60</sup>. Are those just symptoms of online fatigue, a new way to express political dissent or there is something more worrisome taking shape in our cyber-social world?

These are all important questions deserving further inquiries, given the growing attention reserved to such online campaigns and tactics. While investigators are still working on uncovering potential interference in the 2016 U.S. Presidential campaign, worries are already growing about the 2020 campaign.

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<sup>59</sup> “Facebook set up a war room to combat misinformation ahead of Europe’s Parliamentary elections”, The Verge  
<https://www.theverge.com/2019/5/5/18530337/facebook-european-parliamentary-election-war-room-misinformation>

<sup>60</sup> “Russian Trolls Shift Strategy to Disrupt U.S. Election in 2020”, Bloomberg  
<https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2019-03-09/russian-trolls-shift-strategy-to-disrupt-u-s-election-in-2020>

Similar problems are emerging in the current campaign for the May 23-26 European Parliament elections, with website and social media accounts spreading disinformation, encouraging discord and amplifying distrust in the democratic process<sup>61</sup>.

Recent academic studies and field research revealed that usually social media users involved in such “digital operations” are relatively small numbers, but their ability to reach millions of people is broad and wide<sup>62</sup>. Taking advantage of the simple but effective techniques described above and specific to Instagram, they could easily, for example: join networks representing or discussing political parties, issues; become an “influencer” and control content, tones and topics discussed; and try to exert psychological pressure or other manipulative behaviour.

Our study is intended as an informative contribution within this context. We did not set out to expose a possible “digital operation” or to investigate “hate speech” activities. We rather analyzed the behavior of some Instagram users sharing characteristics, techniques and methods previously used by accounts involved in similar operations. By coupling this suspicious behaviour with carefully-gathered data, we hope that our study (and its subsequent questions) will be helpful in attracting more attention to these issues and thus trigger broader analysis.

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<sup>61</sup> “Russia Is Targeting Europe’s Elections. So Are Far-Right Copycats”, The New York Times  
<https://www.nytimes.com/2019/05/12/world/europe/russian-propaganda-influence-campaign-european-elections-far-right.html>

<sup>62</sup> “How Instagram Became the Russian IRA’s Go-To Social Network”, Wired  
<https://www.wired.com/story/how-instagram-became-russian-iras-social-network/>