

# Is Russian Meddling as Dangerous as We Think? | The New Yorker

By Joshua Yaffa

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In the summer of 2017, Nina Jankowicz, a twenty-eight-year-old American, was working in Kyiv as a communications adviser to Ukraine’s foreign ministry as part of a yearlong Fulbright fellowship. Jankowicz had an interest in digital diplomacy and in countering disinformation that was matched by a passion for musical theatre: in Washington, D.C., where she lived for several years before moving to Ukraine, she played Sally in “You’re a Good Man, Charlie Brown” and Audrey in “Little Shop of Horrors.”

So when she came across a Facebook page for a White House protest that called on “resistance activists, show-tune lovers, and karaoke fans,” her curiosity was piqued. She later spoke with Ryan Clayton, a progressive organizer involved in the protest. On July 4th, a man dressed in a waistcoat and a tricornered hat kicked things off. “Hear ye, hear ye, citizens,” he said, ringing a bell. “Resist the rule of the treasonous King Donald!” Protesters waving American flags performed musical numbers calling for Trump’s impeachment, including “Do You Hear the People Sing?,” the anthem from “Les Misérables.”

Clayton told Jankowicz that he was impressed with the turnout. He suspected that it had something to do with a last-minute Facebook message from a user named Helen Christopherson, who offered to pitch in cash to buy ads in exchange for administrator access to the event page. “I got like \$80 on my ad account so we can reach like 10000 people in DC or so,” the message read. “That would be Massive!” In fact, Christopherson’s ad spend reached as many as fifty-eight thousand people in the D.C. area.

It wasn’t until October of the following year that Jankowicz began to consider how the success of the protest might fit into a broader pattern. As part of congressional inquiries into Russian interference in the 2016 Presidential election, Democrats on the House Intelligence Committee made public a number of ad purchases by the

Internet Research Agency, the so-called “troll factory” in St. Petersburg. The I.R.A. was staffed by hundreds of young Russians who carried out social-media campaigns under false identities. “Helen Christopherson” was a Facebook alias used by one of them. In “How to Lose the Information War,” a persuasive new book on disinformation as a geopolitical strategy, Jankowicz writes, “In an entirely unexpected collision of my two great loves, it seemed that Russia had weaponized show tunes.”

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