

DOUG JONES
ALABAMA

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AGING

United States Senate

January 9, 2019

MUR # 7562

OFFICE OF
GENERAL COUNSEL

JAN 29 AM 10:31

Ms. Ellen Weintraub, Chair
Federal Election Commission
1050 First Street, N.E.
Washington, DC 20463

Dear Ms. Weintraub:

I would like to request that the Commission conduct a thorough investigation into recent allegations reported in the Washington Post¹ and New York Times² relating to efforts to disseminate misinformation in the special election for U.S. Senate held in Alabama in 2017.

Specifically, recent news reports indicate that an organization, Investing In Us, and a company called New Knowledge, funded projects to create two false Facebook pages in connection with the recent special election for the United States Senate in Alabama in December of 2017. I have attached copies of these articles for your convenience. I am truly outraged by these news reports. Such deceptive tactics have no place in American politics and must be repudiated by those involved in our political system.

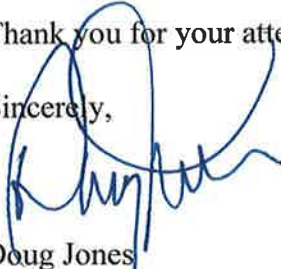
This matter may involve violations of the Federal Election Campaign Act in connection with a U.S. Senate election and is therefore within the jurisdiction of the Commission. I request that the Commission conduct a thorough investigation into this matter to determine if any federal election laws were violated and, if so, to impose the maximum penalties allowed. It is imperative to send a clear message that these disinformation tactics will not be tolerated and will be punished to the fullest extent of the law.

¹ Craig Timberg, Tony Room and Aaron C. Davis, *Researcher whose firm wrote report on Russian interference used questionable online tactics during Ala. Senate race*, Washington Post, December 18, 2018

² Scott Shane and Alan Blinder, *Secret Experiment in Alabama Senate Race Imitated Russian Tactics*, New York Times, December 19, 2018, and Scott Shane and Alan Blinder, *Democrats Faked Online Push to Outlaw Alcohol in Alabama Race*, New York Times, January 7, 2019.

Thank you for your attention to this important matter.

Sincerely,



Doug Jones
United States Senator

SWORN TO AND SUBSCRIBED before me this 9 day of January, 2019.



The Switch

Researcher whose firm wrote report on Russian interference used questionable online tactics during Ala. Senate race

By [Craig Timberg](#),

[Tony Romm](#) and

[Aaron C. Davis](#)

December 18, 2018

A leading social media researcher whose firm wrote [a major report on Russian disinformation](#) for the Senate acknowledged Tuesday night that he engaged in misleading online tactics of his own during Alabama's hotly contested special election last year.

Jonathon Morgan, chief executive of the research firm New Knowledge, said he created a Facebook page under false pretenses to test his ability to appeal to conservative voters and bought a small amount of retweets — spending less than \$10 — to measure the potential “lift” he could achieve in social media messaging.

Morgan said that he took these actions in his own capacity as a researcher seeking to understand the mechanics of disinformation tactics, not as New Knowledge's leader, and that neither tactic was intended to affect the outcome of [the race between](#) Republican Roy Moore and Democrat Doug Jones, who won the race and is now a U.S. senator.

New Knowledge anchored [one of two comprehensive new reports](#) on Russian disinformation released by the Senate Intelligence Committee this week. That report also had two other authors not affiliated with Morgan. The authors of the second report released by the committee this week have no affiliation with Morgan.

Of his actions, Morgan said, “This was like an, ‘Is it possible,’ small-scale, almost like a thought experiment.” Having long studied Russian disinformation, he said he wondered, “Is it as easy as it might seem?”

Morgan said Tuesday night that he was no longer fully comfortable with his actions from a year ago.

“At the time, it seemed kind of innocuous, and a year later, with the benefit of history ... maybe I would second-guess that decision now,” Morgan said.

He said he chose to create a Facebook page for conservatives not for partisan reasons but because he was hoping to mimic existing disinformation operations, which have been more active in targeting conservative rather than liberal voters. Morgan said he did not recall the name of the Twitter account for which he bought retweets but said it was not a campaign or other explicitly political account.

Morgan also was among a team of researchers behind the Hamilton 68 dashboard, a project of the German Marshall Fund's Alliance for Securing Democracy that seeks to track trends in Russian disinformation as it happens.

Craig Timberg

Craig Timberg is a national technology reporter for The Washington Post. Since joining The Post in 1998, he has been a reporter, editor and foreign correspondent, and he contributed to The Post's Pulitzer Prize-winning coverage of the National Security Agency. Follow [🐦](#)

Tony Romm

Tony Romm is a technology policy reporter at The Washington Post. He has spent more than eight years covering the ways that tech companies like Apple, Facebook and Google navigate the corridors of government — and the regulations that sometimes result. Follow [🐦](#)

The New York Times

Secret Experiment in Alabama Senate Race Imitated Russian Tactics

By **Scott Shane and Alan Blinder**

Dec. 19, 2018

As Russia's online election machinations came to light last year, a group of Democratic tech experts decided to try out similarly deceptive tactics in the fiercely contested Alabama Senate race, according to people familiar with the effort and a report on its results.

The secret project, carried out on Facebook and Twitter, was likely too small to have a significant effect on the race, in which the Democratic candidate it was designed to help, Doug Jones, edged out the Republican, Roy S. Moore. But it was a sign that American political operatives of both parties have paid close attention to the Russian methods, which some fear may come to taint elections in the United States.

One participant in the Alabama project, Jonathon Morgan, is the chief executive of New Knowledge, a small cyber security firm that wrote a scathing account of Russia's social media operations in the 2016 election that was released this week by the Senate Intelligence Committee.

An internal report on the Alabama effort, obtained by The New York Times, says explicitly that it "experimented with many of the tactics now understood to have influenced the 2016 elections."

The project's operators created a Facebook page on which they posed as conservative Alabamians, using it to try to divide Republicans and even to endorse a write-in candidate to draw votes from Mr. Moore. It involved a scheme to link the Moore campaign to thousands of Russian accounts that suddenly began following the Republican candidate on Twitter, a development that drew national media attention.

"We orchestrated an elaborate 'false flag' operation that planted the idea that the Moore campaign was amplified on social media by a Russian botnet," the report says.

Mr. Morgan said in an interview that the Russian botnet ruse "does not ring a bell," adding that others had worked on the effort and had written the report. He said he saw the project as "a small experiment" designed to explore how certain online tactics worked, not to affect the election.

Mr. Morgan said he could not account for the claims in the report that the project sought to "enrage and energize Democrats" and "depress turnout" among Republicans, partly by emphasizing accusations that Mr. Moore had pursued teenage girls when he was a prosecutor in his 30s.

"The research project was intended to help us understand how these kind of campaigns operated," said Mr. Morgan. "We thought it was useful to work in the context of a real election but design it to have almost no impact."

The project had a budget of just \$100,000, in a race that cost approximately \$51 million, including the primaries, according to Federal Election Commission records.



Workers hung a United States flag in preparation for a Roy Moore rally held in Midland City, Ala. Carlo Allegri/Reuters

But however modest, the influence effort in Alabama may be a sign of things to come. Campaign veterans in both parties fear the Russian example may set off a race to the bottom, in which candidates choose social media manipulation because they fear their opponents will.

“Some will do whatever it takes to win,” said Dan Bayens, a Kentucky-based Republican consultant. “You’ve got Russia, which showed folks how to do it, you’ve got consultants willing to engage in this type of behavior and political leaders who apparently find it futile to stop it.”

There is no evidence that Mr. Jones sanctioned or was even aware of the social media project. Joe Trippi, a seasoned Democratic operative who served as a top adviser to the Jones campaign, said he had noticed the Russian bot swarm suddenly following Mr. Moore on Twitter. But he said it was impossible that a \$100,000 operation had an impact on the race.

Mr. Trippi said he was nonetheless disturbed by the stealth operation. “I think the big danger is somebody in this cycle uses the dark arts of bots and social networks and it works,” he said. “Then we’re in real trouble.”

Despite its small size, the Alabama project brought together some prominent names in the world of political technology. The funding came from Reid Hoffman, the billionaire co-founder of LinkedIn, who has sought to help Democrats catch up with Republicans in their use of online technology.

The money passed through American Engagement Technologies, run by Mikey Dickerson, the founding director of the United States Digital Service, which was created during the Obama administration to try to upgrade the federal government’s use of technology. Sara K. Hudson, a former Justice Department fellow now with Investing in Us, a tech finance company partly funded by Mr. Hoffman, worked on the project, along with Mr. Morgan.

A close collaborator of Mr. Hoffman, Dmitri Mehlhorn, the founder of Investing in Us, said in a statement that “our purpose in investing in politics and civic engagement is to strengthen American democracy” and that while they do not “micromanage” the projects they fund, they are not aware of having financed projects that have used deception. Mr. Dickerson declined to comment and Ms. Hudson did not respond to queries.

The Alabama project got started as Democrats were coming to grips with the Russians' weaponizing of social media to undermine the presidential campaign of Hillary Clinton and promote Donald J. Trump.

Mr. Morgan reached out at the time to Renée DiResta, who would later join New Knowledge and was lead author of the report on Russian social media operations released this week.

"I know there were people who believed the Democrats needed to fight fire with fire," Ms. DiResta said, adding that she disagreed. "It was absolutely chatter going around the party."

But she said Mr. Morgan simply asked her for suggestions of online tactics worth testing. "My understanding was that they were going to investigate to what extent they could grow audiences for Facebook pages using sensational news," she said.

Mr. Morgan confirmed that the project created a generic page to draw conservative Alabamians — he said he couldn't remember its name — and that Mac Watson, one of multiple write-in candidates, contacted the page. "But we didn't do anything on his behalf," he said.

The report, however, says the Facebook page agreed to “boost” Mr. Watson’s campaign and stayed in regular touch with him, and was “treated as an advisor and the go-to media contact for the write-in candidate.” The report claims the page got him interviews with The Montgomery Advertiser and The Washington Post.

Mr. Watson, who runs a patio supply company in Auburn, Ala., confirmed that he got some assistance from a Facebook page whose operators seemed determined to stay in the shadows.

Of dozens of conservative Alabamian-oriented pages on Facebook that he wrote to, only one replied. “You are in a particularly interesting position and from what we have read of your politics, we would be inclined to endorse you,” the unnamed operator of the page wrote. After Mr. Watson answered a single question about abortion rights as a sort of test, the page offered an endorsement, though no money.

“They never spent one red dime as far as I know on anything I did — they just kind of told their 400 followers, ‘Hey, vote for this guy,’” Mr. Watson said.

Mr. Watson never spoke with the page’s author or authors by phone, and they declined a request for meeting. But he did notice something unusual: his Twitter followers suddenly ballooned from about 100 to about 10,000. The Facebook page’s operators asked Mr. Watson whether he trusted anyone to set up a super PAC that could receive funding and offered advice on how to sharpen his appeal to disenfranchised Republican voters.

Shortly before the election, the page sent him a message, wishing him luck.

The report does not say whether the project purchased the Russian bot Twitter accounts that suddenly began to follow Mr. Moore. But it takes credit for “radicalizing Democrats with a Russian bot scandal” and points to stories on the phenomenon in the mainstream media. “Roy Moore flooded with fake Russian Twitter followers,” reported The New York Post.

Inside the Moore campaign, officials began to worry about online interference.

“We did have suspicions that something odd was going on,” said Rich Hobson, Mr. Moore’s campaign manager. Mr. Hobson said that although he did not recall any hard evidence of interference, the campaign complained to Facebook about potential chicanery.

“Any and all of these things could make a difference,” Mr. Hobson said. “It’s definitely frustrating, and we still kick ourselves that Judge Moore didn’t win.”

When Election Day came, Mr. Jones became the first Alabama Democrat elected to the Senate in a quarter of a century, defeating Mr. Moore by 21,924 votes in a race that drew more than 22,800 write-in votes. More than 1.3 million ballots were cast over all.

Many of the write-in votes went to then-Attorney General Jeff Sessions, Condoleezza Rice — an Alabama native and former secretary of state — certain popular football coaches and Jesus Christ. Mr. Watson drew just a few hundred votes.

Mr. Watson noticed one other oddity. The day after the vote, the Facebook page that had taken such an interest in him had vanished.

“It was a group that, like, honest to God, next day was gone,” said Mr. Watson.

“It was weird,” he said. “The whole thing was weird.”

Jonathan Martin and Rachel Shorey contributed reporting.

The New York Times

Democrats Faked Online Push to Outlaw Alcohol in Alabama Race

By Scott Shane and Alan Blinder

Jan. 7, 2019

The “Dry Alabama” Facebook page, illustrated with stark images of car wrecks and videos of families ruined by drink, had a blunt message: Alcohol is the devil’s work, and the state should ban it entirely.

Along with a companion Twitter feed, the Facebook page appeared to be the work of Baptist teetotalers who supported the Republican, Roy S. Moore, in the 2017 Alabama Senate race. “Pray for Roy Moore,” one tweet exhorted.

In fact, the Dry Alabama campaign, not previously reported, was the stealth creation of progressive Democrats who were out to defeat Mr. Moore — the second such secret effort to be unmasked. In a political bank shot made in the last two weeks of the campaign, they thought associating Mr. Moore with calls for a statewide alcohol ban would hurt him with moderate, business-oriented Republicans and assist the Democrat, Doug Jones, who won the special election by a hair-thin margin.

Matt Osborne, a veteran progressive activist who worked on the project, said he hoped that such deceptive tactics would someday be banned from American politics. But in the meantime, he said, he believes that Republicans are using such trickery and that Democrats cannot unilaterally give it up.

“If you don’t do it, you’re fighting with one hand tied behind your back,” said Mr. Osborne, a writer and consultant who lives outside Florence, Ala. “You have a moral imperative to do this — to do whatever it takes.”

The discovery of Dry Alabama, the second so-called false flag operation by Democrats in the fiercely contested Alabama race, underscores how dirty tricks on social media are creeping into American politics. The New York Times reported last month on a separate project that used its own bogus conservative Facebook page and sent a horde of Russian-looking Twitter accounts to follow Mr. Moore’s to make it appear as if he enjoyed Russian support.



The Dry Alabama project was intended to help the Democratic candidate Doug Jones by tying his opponent, Roy Moore, to calls for a statewide alcohol ban.
Justin Sullivan/Getty Images

The revelations about the first project, run in part by a cybersecurity company called New Knowledge, led Facebook to shut down five accounts that it said had violated its rules, and prompted Senator Jones to call for a federal investigation. There is no evidence that Mr. Jones encouraged or knew of either of the deceptive social media projects. His spokeswoman, Heather Fluit, said his legal advisers were preparing to file a formal complaint with the Federal Election Commission.

Both Alabama projects were devised shortly after the exposure of the full dimensions of Russia's fraudulent use of social media in the 2016 presidential race, when thousands of Facebook and Twitter accounts posed as Americans. Because the Russian operation attacked Hillary Clinton and helped Donald J. Trump, Democrats have spoken out most vehemently against it.

So some Democrats were discomfited by the revelation that the first of the Alabama efforts was explicitly devised to try out the tactics of the Russian operation, according to an internal report on the project obtained by The Times. Rather than Russians working in St. Petersburg posing as Americans, this time Democrats — most of them far from Alabama — pretended to be conservative state residents.

The first of the Alabama efforts was funded by Reid Hoffman, the billionaire co-founder of LinkedIn, who apologized and said he had been unaware of the project and did not approve of the underhanded methods. The second was funded by two Virginia donors who wanted to defeat Mr. Moore — a former judge accused of pursuing sexual relationships with underage girls — according to a participant who would speak about the secret project only on the condition of anonymity and who declined to name the funders.

The two projects each received \$100,000, funneled in both cases through the same organization: Investing in Us, which finances political operations in support of progressive causes. Dmitri Mehlhorn, the group's managing partner, declined to comment on whether he approved of the tactics he had helped pay for. But after the Times report in December, he acknowledged, in a post on the online forum Medium, a "concern that our tactics might cause us to become like those we are fighting." He declared that "some tactics are beyond the pale."

Another organizer of the project, according to two participants, was Evan Coren, a progressive activist who works for the National Archives unit that handles classified documents. He did not respond to requests for comment. Beth Becker, a social media trainer and consultant in Washington who handled Facebook ad spending for the Dry Alabama page and the project's other Facebook page, called Southern Caller, said in an interview that a nondisclosure agreement prohibited her from saying much about the project.

But, she added, "I don't think anything this group did crossed any lines."

That may be true in the sense that neither law nor regulations set any clear limits on social media activity in elections. "The law has clearly not caught up with social media," Ms. Becker said.

Mr. Moore at a rally shortly before the election. The Dry Alabama effort was carried out in the last two weeks of the campaign. Emily Kask for The New York Times

But there is no doubt that the progressive Democrats who created the now-defunct Facebook pages — and the related Twitter feeds, seeming afterthoughts with negligible reach — were trying to deceive voters about their identities and real views. "Re-enact Prohibition and make Alabama dry again!" said one post. "Democrats continue to put party before country," said another.

Facebook's community standards, which were tightened in 2018, emphasize "authenticity" and prohibit "misrepresentation," including coordinated efforts to "mislead people about the origin of content."

Political social media trickery of this sort is usually well hidden and hard to detect without help from an insider, so it's difficult to say how common it has become. Some political veterans warn that without new laws or regulations explicitly outlawing fraudulent social media tactics, both parties may feel pressure to use them simply to stay competitive.

There were at least two more social media operations intended to help Mr. Jones's campaign, run by small companies called Tovo Labs and Dialectica. Neither responded to queries about their tactics. A public account by Tovo Labs of its effort described setting up websites for Christian conservatives and moderate conservatives but claimed all the content was "legitimate material" and its methods "ethical." A pitch to potential customers from Dialectica offers "a new generation of information weapons" to battle "fake news," and a marketing email shared with The Times says the company worked in the Alabama race's "meme war" for at least three months.

Mr. Osborne, who said he helped conceive the Dry Alabama project and wrote for the Southern Caller page, said the effort began in conversations with acquaintances from his years at the annual Netroots Nation progressive gatherings. They discussed what tactics might help Mr. Jones's chances and zeroed in on tensions within the Republican Party over whether drinking should be permitted in Alabama, where the number of dry counties had dwindled.

"Business conservatives favor wet; culture-war conservatives favor dry," he said. "That gave us an idea."

Essentially, the aim was to frighten the business conservatives — who could be targeted with ads using Facebook's tools — with the potential implications of a Moore victory. Some ideas were nixed by organizers: A raffle of an AR-15 assault rifle was out, Mr. Osborne was told, as was outright homophobic language.

Mr. Jones won the fiercely contested race by about 22,000 votes, out of more than 1.3 million. Bob Miller for The New York Times

"I learned that if you're doing a false-flag conservative page for a liberal donor, there are limits," he said. But he said he enjoyed mimicking the voices of his conservative opponents who dominate in the state.

By the time the project got funding, there were only two weeks left in the race. With salaries needed only briefly, about 80 percent of the \$100,000 went toward Facebook ads.

Elizabeth BeShears, a Republican communications consultant from Birmingham, was amused when she spotted a Dry Alabama ad on Facebook demanding that candidates pledge to try to ban drinking, because her husband's family had strongly supported a recent effort to turn a county "wet."

She assumed the Dry Alabama ads were aimed at anti-alcohol conservatives, and posted on Twitter a screenshot of the Facebook ad with the remark, "Y'all's targeting is so wrong." In fact, Mr. Osborne said, Ms. BeShears was the perfect target for the ads. She voted for Mr. Jones out of disgust for Mr. Moore, though she didn't need the Dry Alabama ad to persuade her, she said.

Mr. Osborne said the stats he was given on the reach of the brief Facebook operation were impressive: 4.6 million views of the Facebook posts, and 97,000 engagements — for instance, "liking" or sharing posts. Simple videos pushing the Dry Alabama message were watched 430,000 times, he said.

Given Mr. Jones's slender margin of victory — about 22,000 votes, out of more than 1.3 million — it is hard to say for sure that Dry Alabama had no impact. But many other independent efforts were at play on both sides, and the amount spent on the two false flag projects was relatively tiny in a race that cost at least \$51 million, including the primaries.

Ms. BeShears said she doubted the Dry Alabama effort had had a significant effect on the outcome, in part because Mr. Moore was seen as a toxic candidate and Alabamians had long harbored strong views about him. By the time the project was carried out, few voters were undecided, she said.

"I don't think most people saw it and thought that's a reason to vote or not to vote for Roy Moore," she said. "The only people who were still hanging on to the Roy Moore bandwagon were going to be there no matter what. Whether you're still going to be able to drink a beer at your tailgate was not going to sway them."

A version of this article appears in print on Jan. 7, 2019, on Page A1 of the New York edition with the headline: 2nd Effort at Social Media Fakery Is Uncovered in Alabama Race

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