

Senate Intelligence Committee Grills Facebook, Twitter, and Google about Russia's Role in 2016 Presidential Election

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Colin Stretch, Facebook's general counsel; Sean Edgett, Twitter's acting general counsel; and Kent Walker, Google's general counsel. Photo courtesy of Business Insider. [/caption]

Summary: The Senate Intelligence Committee probed the legal heads of Facebook, Twitter, and Google about the platforms' respective ties to Russian propagandists.

Wednesday marked the second day of questioning from the bipartisan Senate Intelligence Committee in Washington, DC. During this hearing, lawyers from Facebook, Twitter, and Google were grilled about those platforms' roles in Russia's alleged attempt to sway the 2016 presidential election. According to multiple media sources, those organizations took a beating.

Colin Stretch, Facebook's general counsel; Sean Edgett, Twitter's acting general counsel; and Kent Walker, Google's general counsel who reports to the company's CEO, Sundar Pichai were in attendance, according to *Business Insider*. On Wednesday morning, Democrat Senator Dianne Feinstein laid into the representatives for "not getting it."

"I must say, I don't think you get it. You're general counsels, you defend your company. What we're talking about is a cataclysmic change. What we're talking about is the beginning of cyber warfare," Feinstein said during the hearing. "We are not going to go away, gentlemen. And this is a very big deal. I went home last night with profound disappointment. I asked specific questions, I got vague answers. And that just won't do."

Members of the Senate Intelligence Committee accused the three tech giants of creating platforms that allowed cyberwarfare, and some added that their business models allowed Russia to create discord in our country.

"Russians have been conducting information warfare for decades," Democratic Senator Mark Warner said. "But what is new is the advent of social-media tools with the power to magnify propaganda and fake news on a scale that was unimaginable back in the days of the Berlin Wall. Today's tools seem almost purpose-built for Russian disinformation techniques."

Republican Senator Richard Burr showed how fake accounts created real-life conflict. According to *Wired*, a Russian propaganda group called the Internet Research Agency started a clash outside the Islamic Center in Houston after using two fake Facebook pages to draw in warring groups to one location at a specified time. While it was argued that there is no proof that Russia was able to influence the election, Burr used this instance to prove that online troublemaking can create actual problems.

Facebook, Google, and Twitter said that they do not have conclusive data yet on Russia's actions, and *Wired* said that they had almost two years to complete this research.

"Many of us on this committee have been raising these issues since the beginning of this year," Warner said. "Our claims were frankly blown off by the leadership of your companies."

Facebook, Google (which owns YouTube), and Twitter said that they had removed fake accounts once they realized that they were fake or spamming people. Google said that it did not remove content from RT, a Russian television station, because it had not violated its terms of service.

Federal law prohibits foreign bodies from interfering in our elections, and Republican Senator Marco Rubio asked why these tech platforms did not stop fake accounts from spreading misinformation that influenced the campaigns. The Senate Intelligence Committee said that Russians were able to target ads to voters in an attempt to sway their opinions, and the tech companies said they had no evidence of voter lists being used. However, the social media companies revealed that Russians had purchased ads on their platforms.

The Committee said that it is unclear what the goal of the Internet Research Agency actually is, considering they post liberal and conservative content. One theory is that they want to strengthen the divide between the two parties in the United States and that it wasn't the outcome of the election that they cared about. Instead, it was about the anger and conflict.

"This is not an opposition of free speech battle. This is actually a battle to try to protect free speech," Republican Sen. James Lankford said. "If two Americans have a disagreement. Let's have at it. If an outsider wants to come to it, we do have a problem with that."

To remedy the problem of foreign bodies influencing American elections, Democratic Senator Joe Manchin suggested that Facebook, Google, and Twitter publish disclosures on political content and maintain a database of who is responsible for what political ad.

- [Roger Stone Denies Colluding with Russians](#)
- [Russia Retaliates Against US Sanctions](#)
- [Donald Trump Jr. Met with Russian Lawyer During Campaign](#)
- [Special Counsel Robert Mueller Puts Together Top Legal Team](#)

What do you think of the information that came out of Wednesday's Senate Intelligence Committee meeting? Let us know in the comments below.

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