

# From Anger to Love: Russian Trolls and Desert Fathers

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We have all heard about the Russian trolling of the 2016 Election. We know that a Russian propaganda group named Internet Research Agency with hundreds of employees released over 3,500 ads on Facebook, which led to over 80,000 organic posts, which is what the unpaid sharing of posts is called. It is believed that 11 million people saw the ads directly, and that there may have been more than 120 million who viewed the organic posts generated by their pages and ads.

What is remarkable is that, although many would have expected the Russians to be promoting a particular candidate over the other, that was not quite what actually happened. Although there were ads such as these, the intent seemed much broader than that. It was an attempt to sow discord among us, to break apart a shared feeling of national sentiment, and to promote anger between discrete groups of individuals.

The image shows a screenshot of a Facebook event page. At the top, it says "Being Patriotic shared their event." with a "Sponsored" tag. Below this is a text block: "America has always been hinged on hard-working people. If you remove jobs, you'll remove our country from the world map. The state of Pennsylvania rose owing to multiple enterprises mining coal, producing steel, and creating the need for other jobs, groceries, doctors, dentists, insurance, gas, vehicles, mechanics and the list goes on. As far as Mr. Trump pursues the goal of creating more jobs and supports the working class. He said he would put miners back to work. We could ... See More". Below the text is a photo of a group of miners and Donald Trump. Many are holding signs that say "TRUMP DIGS COAL" and "MINERS FOR TRUMP RALLIES". Below the photo, the event title is "OCT 2 Miners for Trump: Unity day in Pennsyl..." with the date "Sun 2 PM EDT · Pennsylvania" and "77 people interested · 16 people going". There is an "Interested" button. At the bottom left, it says "260 Reactions 27 Comments".

Slide 1

The trolls set up a page called “South United,” which proudly depicted a Confederate Battle flag. But, beginning in 2015, ads were placed to target people in Ferguson, Baltimore, Cleveland, and Charleston, calling for support for the Black Lives Matter movement, using anti-police rhetoric and encouraging mass protests.



Slide 2



Slide 3

The propagandists set up and promoted a page called Brown Power, promoting Chicano nationalism within the United States, getting more than 200,000 followers, with many posts having been shared thousands of times, including one with a map of pre-Mexican-American War North America calling to make America Aztlan again, the name associated with the Mexican territories annexed to the United States following the war.

**Brown Power**  
Sponsored · 🌐

Like Page

Make America Aztlan again!

11K Reactions 229 Comments 6.6K Shares

Slide 4

Ads were placed for a made-up group called Heart of Texas, featuring pro-Second Amendment content, anti-Hillary Clinton content, and immigration fear-mongering, particularly regarding Muslims, as well as calling for Texans to prepare to secede from the Union, garnering over 250,000 followers.

**Heart of Texas**  
Sponsored · 🌐

Like Page

Border Patrol agents in South Texas arrested an illegal alien from Honduras that had previously been deported and convicted of Rape Second Degree.

Thanks to Obama's and Hillary's policy, illegals come here because they wait for amnesty promised. The wrong course had been chosen by the American government, but all those politicians are too far from the border to see who actually sneaks through it illegally.

Rapists, drug dealers, human traffickers, and others. The percent of innocent poor families searching for a better life is too small to become an argument for amnesty and Texas warm welcome.

3.1K Reactions 89 Comments 1.2K Shares

**Heart of Texas** shared their event.  
Sponsored · 🌐

Fellow Texans! It's time to say a strong NO to the establishment robbers. It is unacceptable for us to see them ruin all we've been building for decades. For centuries. The establishment thinks they can treat us like stupid sheep but they are wrong. We won't put up with this anymore. The corrupt media does not talk about the crimes committed by Killary Rotten Clinton, neither does it mention the leaked emails but it would rather keep on kicking around some outdated tapes feat... [See More](#)

**GET READY TO SECEDE!**

NOV 5 **Get Ready to Secede!**  
Sat 1 PM CDT · Texas  
516 people interested · 96 people going

★ Interested

1.9K Reactions 143 Comments

Slide 5

The trolls also, however, ran a page called United Muslims of America, which supported Hillary Clinton and Bernie Sanders and grew to 325,000 followers. This page facilitated heated arguments with the people from the Heart of Texas page.

Suggested Page

**United Muslims of America**  
Sponsored

USA Muslims united اتحاد مسلمي الولايات المتحدة



**United Muslims of America**  
Community  
326,463 people like this.

Like Page

**United Muslims of America**  
Sponsored · 🌐

Like Page

It was a powerful moment in an America that has seen hate crimes against Muslim Americans triple since November. In an America where the Republican political party had a 44% very unfavorable view of Islam, despite 78% of the same Republican respondents saying they neither worked with nor had any Muslim friends, according to a YouGov poll conducted from 6 -9 March, 2015. In an America where failed businessman and top contender for the GOP nomination Donald Trump has publicly a... See More



**Sanders Win With Help From Arab  
And Muslim Americans Is No Surprise**

93 Reactions 6 Comments 20 Shares

Slide 6

Ads were placed for pro-Trump rallies and anti-Trump rallies. The propagandists would organize both sides of events in an effort to stir up as much division and anger as possible. The trolls successfully organized a protest called “Stop the Islamization of Texas” in Houston through the Heart of Texas group, as well as the counter-protest on the same day through the United Muslims of America group. The ads for this real-life event cost only \$200.

**Being Patriotic** shared their event.  
Sponsored · 🌐

Donald John Trump was elected the 45th president of the United States on Tuesday! Today some massive crowds of libtards marched in NYC against election of Donald Trump.

Come to Trump Tower (725 5th Ave) on Saturday to show Mr. Trump there actually ARE people in NY who voted for him!



**NOV 12** **Support Trump in NYC**  
Sat 2 PM · Trump Towers at 5th Ave · New York, ...  
248 people interested · 60 people going

**BM** shared their event.  
Sponsored · 🌐

People are genuinely scared for their futures!  
Racism won, Ignorance won, Sexual assault won

**STOP TRUMP! STOP RACISM! JOIN THE PROTEST** at Union Sq.  
Saturday 12 PM  
Bring signs, snacks, water!



**NOV 12** **Trump is NOT my President. March aga...**  
Sat 12 PM EST · Union Square · 14th & Broadwa...  
33,140 people interested · 16,760 people going

Slide 7

**MAY 21, 2016 / 12.00 P.M.**

**STOP ISLAMIZATION OF TEXAS**

ISLAMIC DA'WAH CENTER

Stop Islamization of Texas

Public · Causes · Hosted by Heart of Texas

Interested + Going Invite

Saturday, May 21 at 12 PM  
Next Week

76 interested

Islamic Da'wah Center 201 Travis St, Houston, TX 77002

**United Muslims of America** shared their event.  
Sponsored · 🌐

It's been only a month since Library of Islamic Knowledge at the center in Houston is open

**SAVE ISLAMIC KNOWLEDGE**  
May 21 at 12:00 PM, Houston TX

**MAY 21** **SAVE ISLAMIC KNOWLEDGE**  
Sat 12 PM · Islamic Da'wah Center 201 Travis St...  
42 people interested · 18 people going

Slide 8



Slide 9

It should not be a surprise that the trolls had taken out ads targeting people on all sides of the various spectrums. There have been fascinating studies showing that all that is necessary is to put one group in yellow shirts and another in blue. In almost no time, members of the groups begin to stereotype and dehumanize one another.

In an experiment at Robbers Cave State Park in Eastern Oklahoma in 1954, two tribes of 11-year-old children almost killed one another, just by the nature of being placed in different groups. They were assigned randomly to different tribes who came to call themselves the Eagles and the Rattlers. Neither group knew of the other's existence at first. Once they knew about each other and were pitted against one another in competitions, however, each saw the other tribe as unintelligent and even uncivilized. They began to engage in acts against one another that they would have never performed against members of their own tribe. I think we all probably experienced something like this in junior high or high school, so it is not hard to understand. The Eagles and the Rattlers were, however, finally able to come together to repair the water supply, showing the possibility of uniting through having a common purpose.

The internet and social media enable division perhaps greater than any force in human history. They distance us from one another, the same thing that automobiles do to us on the freeway, and the same thing that advancements in military technology, from spears to stealth bombers, have done to us on the battlefield. It is much easier to dehumanize another when protected by a metal vehicle traveling at great distance from its unseen targets, or from the safety of a predator drone control station thousands of miles away, or from your living room and smart phone.

How many of you have unfriended someone or stopped following a page on Facebook due to their political posts? I know I have. But, while you may think that their posts were dehumanizing others, haven't you effectively dehumanized them as well? That family member, friend, or acquaintance no longer exists to you in that realm because you no longer find them worthy of your attention, your dialogue, and potentially even, your love.

The first UU Principle affirms the inherent worth and dignity of every person. There should be no exceptions based on political perspectives.

As can be seen in many of the ads placed by the propagandists, the intent of such political incitement was to stir up as much anger as possible. The anger was to be directed at external others, enemies defined by politics, by race, by country of origin, by religion, and so on. That anger can harden the heart and blind the intellect, which brings us to Evagrius Ponticus.

Evagrius Ponticus was born in 345 in modern-day Turkey. He became a Christian monk and lived in the monastic communities of Nitria and Kellia near Alexandria in Egypt. He was a theologian and wrote extensively on a variety of topics, known for his work on vices and virtues, his work being foundational for the “Seven Deadly Sins” and the “Seven Virtues” as we know them today. He was one of the first literate monks to write down and systematize the teachings of the Desert Fathers, the Christian hermits, ascetics, and monks who lived in the Egyptian desert starting in the third century and became the model for later Christian monasticism. By the way, there were Desert Mothers as well. Unfortunately, they are less well known.

Evagrius believed that “no other evil makes man in particular as much like a demon as anger” and that “the one who masters anger has mastery over the demons.” Evagrius interprets the scripture to equate anger with the “dragon’s wine,” from which Christians are required to abstain.

Evagrius believed that all of our human powers are healthy by nature because they were created by God. Any sort of vice is really the unnatural functioning of a trait that is inherently good. Anger, as we usually think of it, as directed toward others, is the unnatural functioning of the power of the passions, a misuse of a power good in itself. He offers as practical advice that it is best to “close the door to anger through the lips.”

Wickedness resides in behavior, not being. Thus, it is the requirement of Christians to love their neighbor under all circumstances, since all are made in the image and likeness of God.

Evagrius said that if one is belittled by another, one should bless the one doing the belittling, and cast his or her rancor on the devil, since the devil is the author of both the insult and the rancor. To combat the misuse of the passions, Evagrius promoted spiritual love, which manifests itself as qualities such as kindness, patience, humility, and forbearance, but above all meekness.

Meekness is not a word that many use nowadays. When it is used, it is associated with something like shyness or submissiveness, traits that are usually not looked upon favorably. But that is not the meekness that Evagrius envisioned. He saw meekness as a state of calmness of the passions, and hence, of angerlessness. Meekness is steadfastness of the passions against being aroused in the midst of temptations.

In fact, this form of spiritual love can heal the burns of the passions used improperly. He said “Wrath and hatred increase anger, but mercy and meekness lessen it, even when [anger] is at hand.”

So, what is anger to be used for, if not to be directed at others?

It is to be utilized against the demons, to fight against pride, gluttony, greed, and the rest of the vices. Evagrius said, “This is the meaning of the words from Psalm 4:4: ‘Be angry but sin not.’”

Ultimately, we are to be at once meek and a warrior, loving towards our fellow human beings, and a warrior towards the enemy, the demon of temptation who leads one astray.

So, what does this mean for internet trolls or your Uncle Frank on Facebook with the questionable political beliefs?

For monks in the desert, communication with the divine was paramount. According to Evagrius, as anger towards others blinds the intellect, meekness puts the intellect in a contemplative state. He quoted Matthew 5:24 and said “go be reconciled with your brother and then you shall pray undisturbed.”

Evagrius said that “the love that is charity is to be reckoned a great thing indeed, in that it is able to bridle anger.” This love requires a fundamental readiness to forgive. In Matthew 18:24-35, it was said that unless you forgive the man who owes you a debt, you yourself will not find forgiveness, and will be delivered to the “tormentors.”

For the trolls, the prevailing wisdom has been not to feed them. In some sense, since trolls often are attempting simply to rouse the passions, it makes sense not to engage. This, however, is the same logic as unfriending your friends and relatives who have different opinions than you. They do not simply go away by you not paying attention to them. They are still out there, doing what they are doing, and other people are seeing their posts. What is believed to be a more productive method is to respond to any outrageous claims through a calm, reasoned, and fact-based countering of whatever is being said. When I have tried this myself, I have been surprised many times at the results.

And about that uncle or someone close to you who is not trolling?

Well, it seems to me that you first must attempt to understand why that person believes the way he or she does before attempting any engagement. There is a Buddhist concept called *Pratītyasamutpāda*, the doctrine of dependent origination. Gautama Buddha once said: “Those who perceive ‘dependent origination’ (*pratītyasamutpāda*) will perceive the dharma; those who perceive the dharma will perceive ‘dependent origination’” (*Samyutta Nikāya* [Samyutta 22, 87]). The essence of this idea is “Because this exists, that arises; because this does not exist, that does not arise.” There is no first cause. So, it is not reasonable to simply dismiss a person out-of-hand for what they believe or do, since there are many reasons why that person may believe and behave the way they do, including

things that you may know nothing about. That is where love resides, in understanding that there are reasons for why things are as they are.

A similar concept is the Jain idea of *anekantavada*, or, many-sidedness, which holds that no claim can be considered true without conditions or limitations. Truth itself is conditional, which explains why people can hold conflicting viewpoints and each may be speaking a truth from their own perspective. If you were looking at things from the same perspective as your uncle, you would see them the same way. For these reasons we must be careful not to judge others, for if our circumstances were the same, we would believe or do the same thing ourselves.

Despite appearing like moral relativism, Jains do believe in a higher truth, however, as we all must, in order to move forward. And that is where forgiveness comes in, forgiveness of those who may not see the same higher truth that you see, or for those who have been corrupted by the demons of temptation, as Evagrius might say.

So, where does that take us?

Consistent with the Second UU Principle of justice, equity, and compassion in human relations, Mohandas Gandhi, who integrated some of these perspectives, provides one path forward. Gandhi was heavily influenced by the Jain philosopher Shrimad Rajchandra, by John Ruskin's views on political economy, and by Leo Tolstoy and the notion of non-violent resistance based on Christ's direction to "turn to other cheek." It was Tolstoy who wrote in 1908 that only through love and passive resistance could the Indian people throw off British colonialism. Gandhi merged these perspectives and effectively put them into action as *Satyagraha*, or polite but firm insistence on the truth, based out of love. We know the results, as well as the influence of this movement on the Civil Rights movement in the United States.

The distancing and echo chamber effects of social media are inherently dangerous, and this is why trolls, Russian or otherwise, have been able to exploit this medium so effectively. The self-segregation of social media often reduces the possibilities of working together for a common purpose as well as effective communication with those who may differ from us. On top of that, the incitement of anger, the dragon's wine of Evagrius, effectively throws alcohol onto the already burning flames of mutual hatred of those confined to their respective echo chambers. While we may believe that our struggle is against others, we must realize that much of the struggle, perhaps most of it, is against ourselves. We must restrain the temptations to harshly condemn others, or to engage in violence. We must go forward with understanding, love, and forgiveness for those who consider us their enemies. But, we must also pursue and insist with polite firmness on what we perceive to be the higher truth.

I'd like to close with a letter written by Gandhi to someone who had written to him, alleging that he hated the British.

“My dear young Friend,

I like your frank and sincere letter for which I thank you.

You seem to have taken it for granted that I hate the British. What makes you think so? I have hundreds of friends among the British people. I cannot love the Mussalmans and for that matter the Hindus if I hate the British. My love is not an exclusive affair. If I hate the British today, I would have to hate the Mohammedans tomorrow and the Hindus the day after. But what I do detest is the system of government that the British have set up in my country. It has almost brought the economic and moral ruin of the people of India. But just as I love my wife and children, in spite of their faults which are many, I love also the British in spite of the bad system for which they have unfortunately made themselves responsible. That love which is blind is no love, that love which shuts its eyes to the faults of loved ones is partial and even dangerous. You must write again if this letter does not satisfy you.

Yours sincerely,

MKGandhi”

Thank you.