24 / 07 / 2024

American (Covert) Influence

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American (Convert) Influence

For a long time, hostile digital influence campaigns were predominantly the prerogative of autocratic states. Russia, in particular, has been at the forefront of both executing such campaigns and developing new methodologies in the realm of hostile digital influence.

Recently, some Western democratic countries, such as France and the United States, have been attempting to catch up in this field, albeit arguably with less success. This effort to engage in digital influence campaigns presents unique risks for liberal democracies.

Liberal democracies inherently have more to lose by conducting such operations. Freedom of speech and the free exchange of opinions are cornerstones of any democratic society. When these societies engage in clandestine measures to distort natural discourse, they risk undermining these fundamental principles. By doing so, there is a valid argument to be made that they are eroding the very pillars on which they stand. This paradox raises critical ethical and strategic questions about balancing national security and preserving democratic values.

When it comes to influence defense teams of a country, this new reality brings up a unique set of challenges. Democracies across the world are under a constant barrage of attacks from autocratic countries. However, defense teams now need to consider a new type of threat actor—countries that are theoretically politically aligned with them or even allies.

This development introduces several complexities:

1. **Trust and Verification:** Traditional alliances are built on trust and mutual interests. When allies engage in influence operations, they strain these relationships and complicate coordinating joint efforts in other areas.

2. **Policy and Strategy:** Democracies need to develop policies and strategies that address not only threats from known adversaries but also potential subversive activities from allies. This necessitates a highly nuanced approach to intelligence gathering, threat assessment, and diplomatic engagement, underlining the complexity of the task.

3. **Legal and Ethical Dilemmas:** Engaging in counter-influence operations against allies presents legal and ethical dilemmas. Democracies must balance national security concerns with adherence to international law and the ethical standards they champion.

4. **Public Perception:** Democracies rely heavily on public trust. Revelations about influence operations against or from allies can lead to public distrust in both government institutions and international alliances.

5. **Technological Challenges:** Identifying and mitigating influence operations from allies can be technologically challenging. These actors may have access to similar or even shared technological platforms, making it difficult to detect and attribute attacks accurately.

6. **Operational Security:** The presence of allied threat actors necessitates heightened operational security within influence defense teams. Information-sharing protocols need to be carefully managed to prevent sensitive data from being exploited by those presumed to be allies.

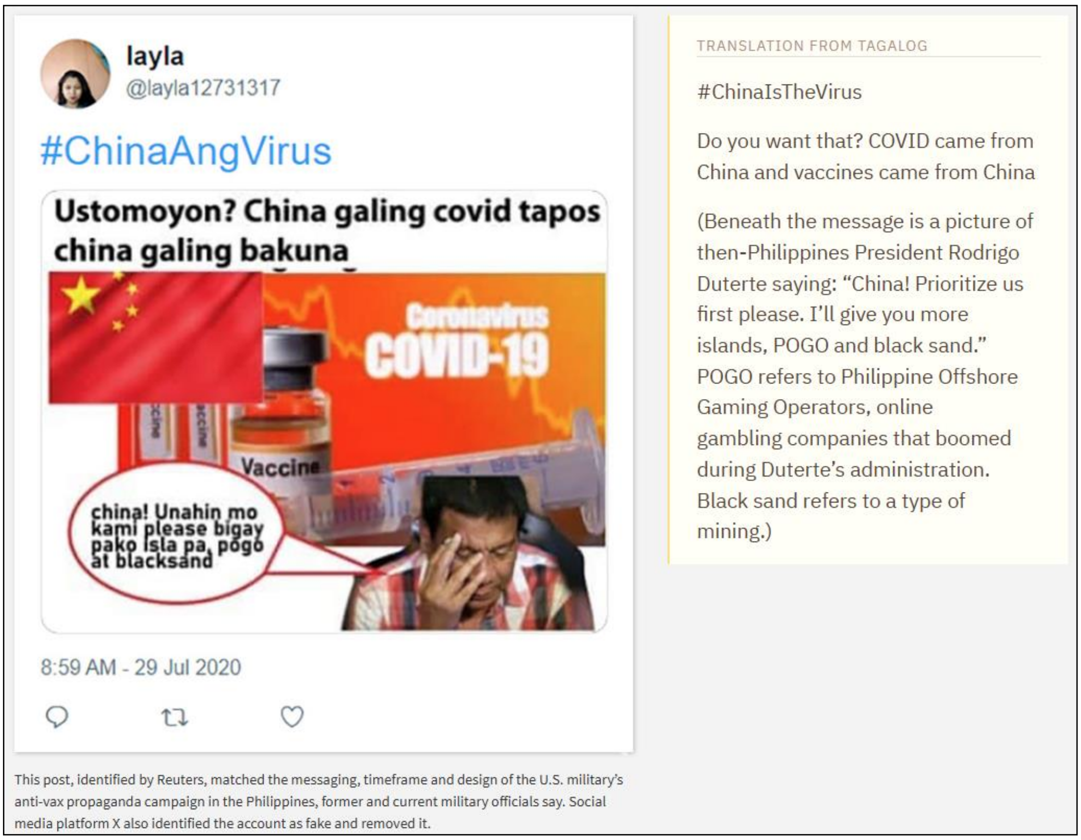
In summary, the evolving landscape of digital influence operations demands that democracies adapt their defense strategies to address not only traditional adversaries but also their allies' complex and sometimes covert actions. This requires a delicate balance of vigilance, transparency, and strategic diplomacy to maintain the integrity of democratic institutions while safeguarding national security. By highlighting attempts by the United States of America to execute such a hostile influence campaign, we hope to add to a much-needed discussion on the use of digital hostile influence campaigns by democratic nations.

An American Hostile Influence Campaign

A Reuters investigation revealed that the US government launched a secret influence campaign to discredit China's own Sinovac vaccine[1]. The campaign targeted the Philippines' online environment, using fake social media accounts that propagated custom-tailored propaganda. The analysis of the content led to the understanding that the campaign's purpose was to undermine China's efforts to improve its position in the region by providing COVID-19-related aid. However, the collateral damage in this Cold War-style smear campaign might have been the lives of innocent citizens of the Philippines.

Reuters detected at least 300 accounts on X (formerly Twitter) likely involved in this campaign targeting the Philippines. These accounts shared suspicious features such as similar creation times and a lack of identifiable information, and they all propagated the same narrative. Eventually, after Reuters approached X, the fake accounts were removed, as the company determined they were part of a coordinated campaign.

The hashtag at the center of this campaign was #Chinaangvirus, which translates from Tagalog to "China is the virus". Additionally, the disseminated posts on X claimed that any aid coming from China, such as face masks and even the vaccine itself, should not be trusted:



layla
@layla12731317

#ChinaAngVirus

Ustomoyon? China galing covid tapos china galing bakuna

Coronavirus
COVID-19
Vaccine
china! Unahin mo kami please bigay pako Isla pa, pogo at blacksand

8:59 AM - 29 Jul 2020

TRANSLATION FROM TAGALOG

#ChinaIsTheVirus

Do you want that? COVID came from China and vaccines came from China

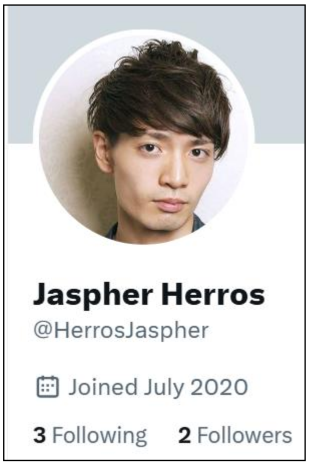
(Beneath the message is a picture of then-Philippines President Rodrigo Duterte saying: "China! Prioritize us first please. I'll give you more islands, POGO and black sand." POGO refers to Philippine Offshore Gaming Operators, online gambling companies that boomed during Duterte's administration. Black sand refers to a type of mining.)

This post, identified by Reuters, matched the messaging, timeframe and design of the U.S. military's anti-vax propaganda campaign in the Philippines, former and current military officials say. Social media platform X also identified the account as fake and removed it.

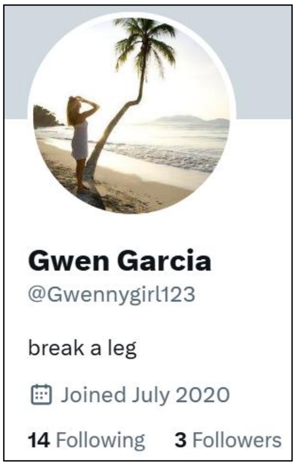
Source: https://www.reuters.com/investigates/special-report/usa-covid-propaganda/

[1] https://www.reuters.com/investigates/special-report/usa-covid-propaganda/

Even though most of the activity linked to this influence campaign was removed from X, we were able to identify possible online traces of it. The following 2 accounts share inauthentic features as well as activity patterns, and both propagated the same anti-China narratives over the same period. [2] [3]

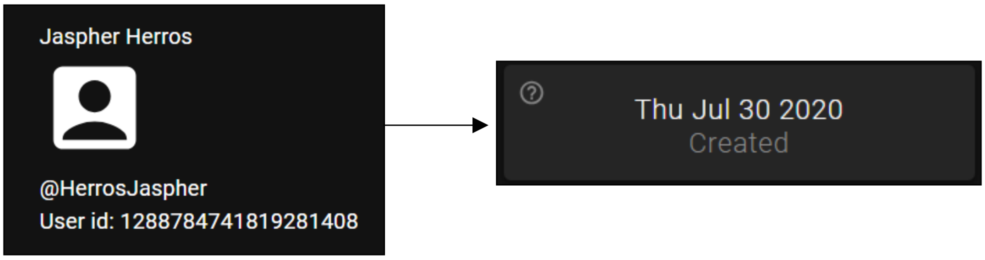


Jaspher Herros
@HerrosJaspher
Joined July 2020
3 Following 2 Followers



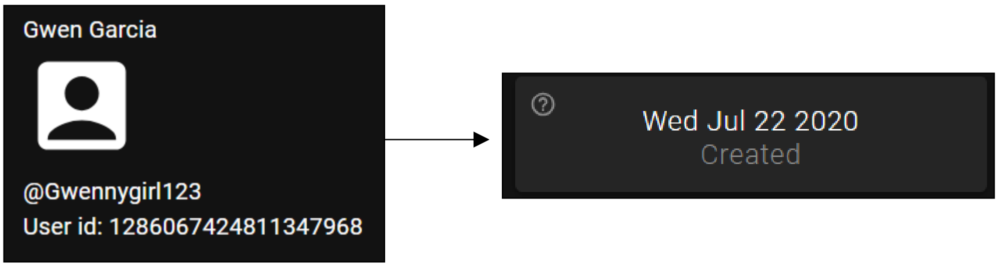
Gwen Garcia
@Gwennygirl123
break a leg
Joined July 2020
14 Following 3 Followers

Both accounts were created in July 2020, only a few days apart:



Jaspher Herros
@HerrosJaspher
User id: 1288784741819281408

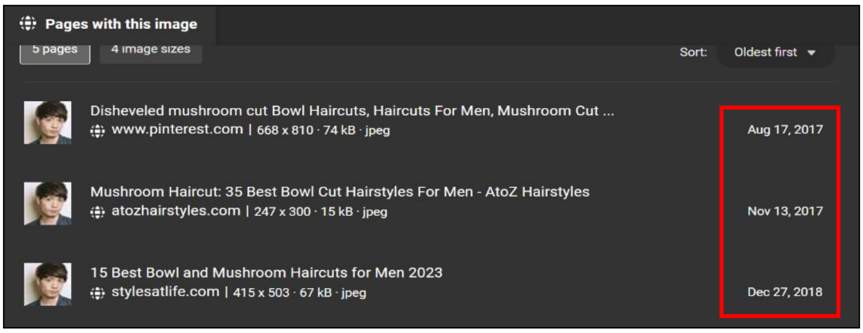
Thu Jul 30 2020
Created



Gwen Garcia
@Gwennygirl123
User id: 1286067424811347968

Wed Jul 22 2020
Created

Their profile pictures can be found elsewhere online, indicating the images are not unique and not personal:



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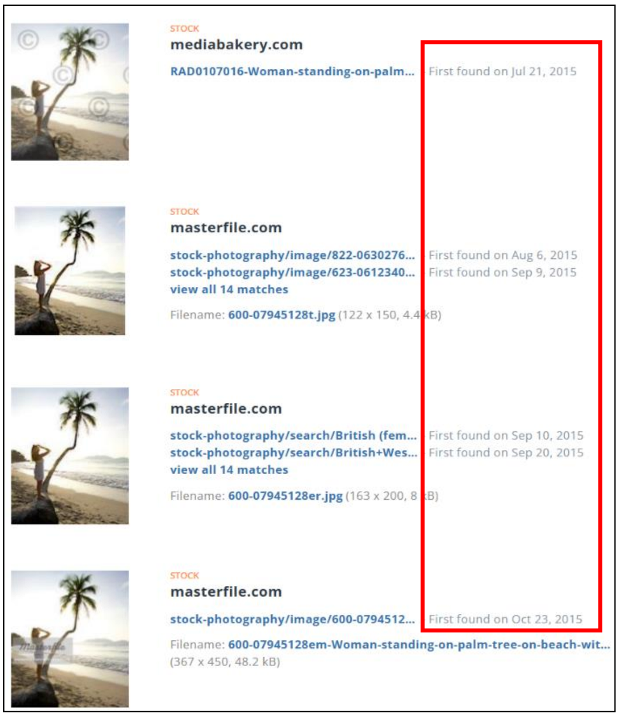
www.pinterest.com | 668 x 810 · 74 kB · jpeg
Aug 17, 2017

Mushroom Haircut: 35 Best Bowl Cut Hairstyles For Men - AtoZ Hairstyles
atozhairstyles.com | 247 x 300 · 15 kB · jpeg
Nov 13, 2017

15 Best Bowl and Mushroom Haircuts for Men 2023
stylesatlife.com | 415 x 503 · 67 kB · jpeg
Dec 27, 2018

[2] https://x.com/HerrosJaspher
[3] https://x.com/Gwennygirl123



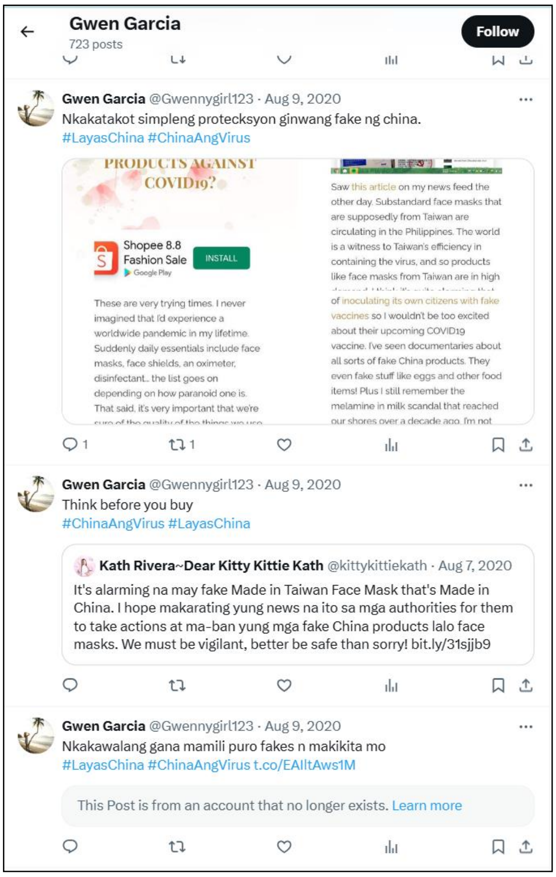
STOCK
mediabakery.com
RAD0107016-Woman-standing-on-palm... First found on Jul 21, 2015

STOCK
masterfile.com
stock-photography/image/822-0630276... First found on Aug 6, 2015
stock-photography/image/623-0612340... First found on Sep 9, 2015
view all 14 matches
Filename: 600-07945128t.jpg (122 x 150, 4.4 kB)

STOCK
masterfile.com
stock-photography/search/British (fem... First found on Sep 10, 2015
stock-photography/search/British+Wes... First found on Sep 20, 2015
view all 14 matches
Filename: 600-07945128er.jpg (163 x 200, 8 kB)

STOCK
masterfile.com
stock-photography/image/600-0794512... First found on Oct 23, 2015
Filename: 600-07945128em-Woman-standing-on-palm-tree-on-beach-wit...
(367 x 450, 48.2 kB)

Both accounts promoted the same hashtags and similar content in the same pattern on August 9, 2020, within the same timeframe:



Gwen Garcia
723 posts

Gwen Garcia @Gwennygirl123 · Aug 9, 2020
Nkakatakot simpleng protecksyon ginwang fake ng china.
#LayasChina #ChinaAngVirus

PRODUCTS AGAINST COVID19?

These are very trying times. I never imagined that I'd experience a worldwide pandemic in my lifetime. Suddenly daily essentials include face masks, face shields, an oximeter, disinfectant.. the list goes on depending on how paranoid one is. That said, it's very important that we're sure of the quality of the things we use

Saw this article on my news feed the other day. Substandard face masks that are supposedly from Taiwan are circulating in the Philippines. The world is a witness to Taiwan's efficiency in containing the virus, and so products like face masks from Taiwan are in high

of inoculating its own citizens with fake vaccines so I wouldn't be too excited about their upcoming COVID19 vaccine. I've seen documentaries about all sorts of fake China products. They even fake stuff like eggs and other food items! Plus I still remember the melamine in milk scandal that reached our shores over a decade ago. I'm not

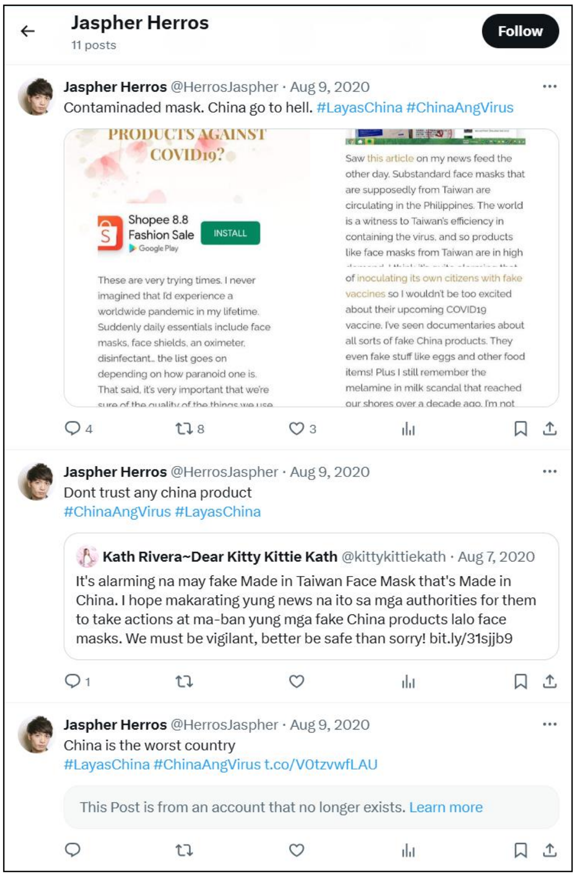
1 1

Gwen Garcia @Gwennygirl123 · Aug 9, 2020
Think before you buy
#ChinaAngVirus #LayasChina

Kath Rivera~Dear Kitty Kittie Kath @kittykittiekath · Aug 7, 2020
It's alarming na may fake Made in Taiwan Face Mask that's Made in China. I hope makarating yung news na ito sa mga authorities for them to take actions at ma-ban yung mga fake China products lalo face masks. We must be vigilant, better be safe than sorry! bit.ly/31sjjb9

Gwen Garcia @Gwennygirl123 · Aug 9, 2020
Nkakawalang gana mamili puro fakes n makikita mo
#LayasChina #ChinaAngVirus t.co/EAlltAws1M

This Post is from an account that no longer exists. Learn more



Jaspher Herros
11 posts

Jaspher Herros @HerrosJaspher · Aug 9, 2020
Contaminaded mask. China go to hell. #LayasChina #ChinaAngVirus

PRODUCTS AGAINST COVID19?

These are very trying times. I never imagined that I'd experience a worldwide pandemic in my lifetime. Suddenly daily essentials include face masks, face shields, an oximeter, disinfectant.. the list goes on depending on how paranoid one is. That said, it's very important that we're sure of the quality of the things we use

Saw this article on my news feed the other day. Substandard face masks that are supposedly from Taiwan are circulating in the Philippines. The world is a witness to Taiwan's efficiency in containing the virus, and so products like face masks from Taiwan are in high

of inoculating its own citizens with fake vaccines so I wouldn't be too excited about their upcoming COVID19 vaccine. I've seen documentaries about all sorts of fake China products. They even fake stuff like eggs and other food items! Plus I still remember the melamine in milk scandal that reached our shores over a decade ago. I'm not

4 8 3

Jaspher Herros @HerrosJaspher · Aug 9, 2020
Dont trust any china product
#ChinaAngVirus #LayasChina

Kath Rivera~Dear Kitty Kittie Kath @kittykittiekath · Aug 7, 2020
It's alarming na may fake Made in Taiwan Face Mask that's Made in China. I hope makarating yung news na ito sa mga authorities for them to take actions at ma-ban yung mga fake China products lalo face masks. We must be vigilant, better be safe than sorry! bit.ly/31sjjb9

1

Jaspher Herros @HerrosJaspher · Aug 9, 2020
China is the worst country
#LayasChina #ChinaAngVirus t.co/V0tzvwfLAU

This Post is from an account that no longer exists. Learn more

These features are highly indicative of a coordinated inauthentic influence effort, similar to previously detected and reported campaigns coming from Russia and China.

According to Reuters, this influence campaign started under former president Donald Trump and continued into Biden's presidency for some time. In 2021, the Biden White House issued an edict banning this campaign, and an internal review was initiated. A Pentagon spokeswoman said that the US military "uses a variety of platforms, including social media, to counter those malign influence attacks aimed at the US, allies, and partners". She also noted that China had started a "disinformation campaign to falsely blame the United States for the spread of COVID-19".[4]

The Philippines saw a significant death toll by November 2021, caused by the pandemic and by difficulties in vaccinating the population. Based on interviews conducted by Reuters and research about the effects of skepticism towards vaccination, it is likely that the covert influence effort exploited an already vulnerable society and contributed to the high death toll in the country.

Reuters unearthed an additional influence effort that originated in the US in 2019, in which the campaign targeted China's own population[5]. According to the former US official who spoke to Reuters and had direct knowledge of this highly classified influence operation, the operation aimed to turn public opinion in China against its government.

The method used for this operation was similar to the one utilized in the Philippines, with some add-ons specifically tailored to the Chinese online audience. The operation consisted of fake online entities that were used for spreading hostile narratives about President Xi's government while leaking intelligence to overseas news sources to hurt the Chinese government's reputation. According to Reuters, some of the narratives that were disseminated by this operation included allegations that members of the ruling Communist Party were hiding ill-gotten money overseas. Another narrative aimed at China's Belt and Road Initiative, calling it corrupt and wasteful.

The uniqueness of this specific operation stems from the US officials' emphasis that these narratives were based, in fact, despite being covertly disseminated by fake online entities operated by intelligence officers. Thus, this influence effort supposedly did not conjure up fabricated pieces of information to serve as disinformation, unlike the operation targeting the Philippines, but tried to insert authentic pieces of information into the highly monitored and censored Chinese online environment. If such a negative narrative was successfully injected into China's online environment, it would likely be flagged by the monitoring Chinese authorities, and a virtual chase would start to identify the source and eliminate all online mentions of it. Indeed, two former officials told Reuters that influence efforts within China were intended to induce paranoia among the top leaders in China, so they would spend their resources chasing virtual intrusions into China's highly enclosed internet environment.

[4] https://www.reuters.com/investigates/special-report/usa-covid-propaganda/

[5] https://www.reuters.com/world/us/trump-launched-cia-covert-influence-operation-against-china-2024-03-14/?utm_source=substack&utm_medium=email

As revealing and unequivocal as these recent publications are, it is important to note that they are not the first US-led efforts to covertly influence foreign online audiences.

In 2022, Facebook's parent company, Meta, reported that people associated with the US military were behind dozens of inauthentic Facebook accounts, pages, groups, and Instagram accounts that promoted pro-US messaging while attempting to obscure their real identities6.

The report stated that several clusters of inauthentic accounts posted content and tried to direct viewers to off-platform domains. The clusters focused on several geographical regions, mainly Iran, the Gulf, Central Asia, the Middle East, and North Africa. The list of specific countries included Afghanistan, Algeria, Iran, Iraq, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Russia, Somalia, Syria, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan and Yemen.

Each cluster posted about particular themes, including sports and culture in a particular country, to appear credible; cooperation with the United States, including military cooperation; and criticism of Iran, China, or Russia. The people operating this network posed as locals in the countries they targeted and used local languages like Arabic, Farsi, and Russian to appear more credible. The main narratives propagated by this network focused on news and current events, terrorism concerns, praise of the US military, and content about COVID-19. This operation also posted content criticizing China and Russia, including Russia's invasion of Ukraine, China's treatment of the Uyghur people, Iran's influence in the Middle East, and the support of the Taliban regime by Russia and China.

Meta shared data regarding this network with independent researchers at Graphika and the Stanford Internet Observatory, who have published their findings7. This joint research highlighted some key features of online inauthentic coordinated behavior similar to those detected in influence efforts by Russia, China, and Iran. For example:

- Inauthentic accounts with GAN[8]-generated faces serving as their profile pictures.
- Inauthentic accounts posed as independent media outlets.
- Utilization of memes and short-form videos.
- Attempts to promote specific hashtags and get them viral.
- Launching online petitions.

The posting patterns also indicated coordination. For example, the daily posting times for each of the detected clusters of inauthentic accounts were quite similar, even though they were supposedly from different countries. The activity of the accounts peaked during the same period in any given 24 hours, usually between 1200 and 1800 GMT:

[6] https://about.fb.com/news/2022/11/metas-adversarial-threat-report-q3-2022/

[7] https://public-assets.graphika.com/reports/graphika_stanford_internet_observatory_report_unheard_voice.pdf

[8] Generative adversarial networks.

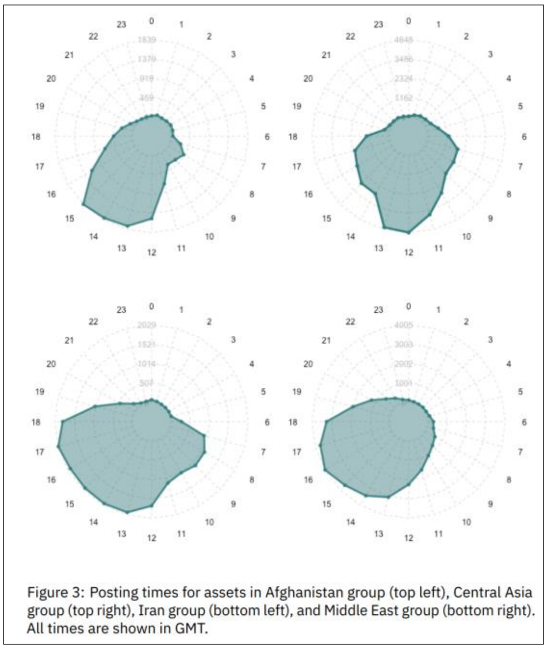


Figure 3: Posting times for assets in Afghanistan group (top left), Central Asia group (top right), Iran group (bottom left), and Middle East group (bottom right). All times are shown in GMT.

Source: https://www.reuters.com/investigates/special-report/usa-covid-propaganda/

Moreover, accounts in some of the clusters typically posted at roughly 15-minute or 30-minute intervals in any given hour, and some almost exclusively posted in the first second of any given minute:

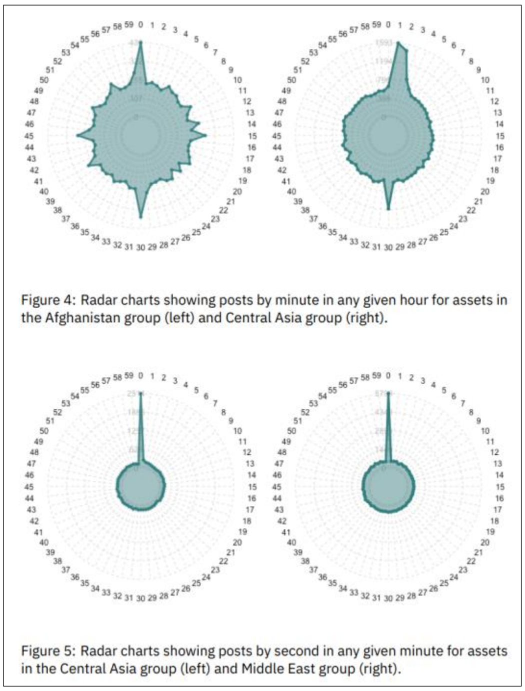
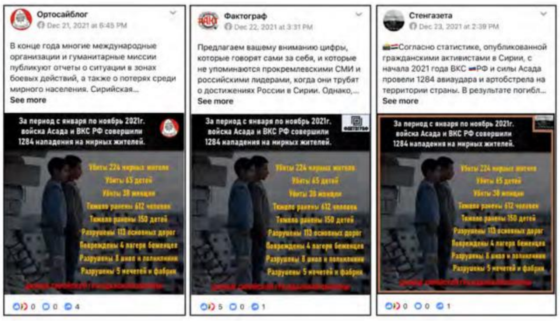


Figure 4: Radar charts showing posts by minute in any given hour for assets in the Afghanistan group (left) and Central Asia group (right).

Figure 5: Radar charts showing posts by second in any given minute for assets in the Central Asia group (left) and Middle East group (right).

Source: https://public-assets.graphika.com/reports/graphika_stanford_internet_observatory_report_unheard_voice.pdf



Ортосайблог
Dec 21, 2021 at 6:45 PM
В конце года многие международные организации и гуманитарные миссии публикуют отчеты о ситуации в зонах боевых действий, а также о потерях среди мирного населения. Сирийская...
See more

Фактограф
Dec 22, 2021 at 3:31 PM
Предлагаем вашему вниманию цифры, которые говорят сами за себя, и которые не упоминаются прокремлевскими СМИ и российскими лидерами, когда они трубят о достижениях России в Сирии. Однако,...
See more

Стенгазета
Dec 23, 2021 at 2:39 PM
Согласно статистике, опубликованной гражданскими активистами в Сирии, с начала 2021 года ВКС РФ и силы Асада провели 1284 авиаудара и артобстрела на территории страны. В результате погибл...
See more

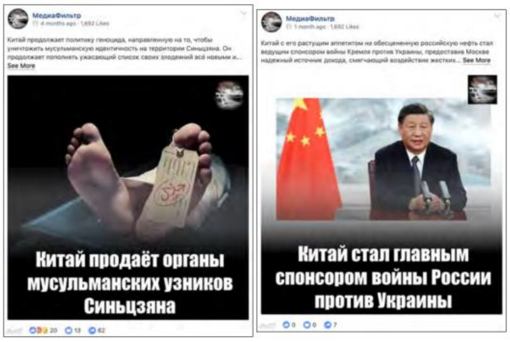
За период с января по ноябрь 2021г. войска Асада и ВКС РФ совершили 1284 нападения на мирных жителей.
Убиты 224 мирных жителя
Убиты 65 детей
Убиты 38 женщин
Тяжело ранены 612 человек
Тяжело ранены 150 детей
Разрушены 113 основных дорог
Повреждены 4 лагеря беженцев
Разрушены 8 школ и поликлиник
Разрушены 5 мечетей и фабрик
0 0 4
5 0 1
0 0 1

Figure 12: Three assets in the group coordinated posting over three days in December 2021.

Source: https://public-assets.graphika.com/reports/graphika_stanford_internet_observatory_report_unheard_voice.pdf

The joint investigation by Graphika and the Stanford Internet Observatory detected coordination in the content that was also disseminated. The involved accounts posted simultaneously, used the same images, and recycled content over time across accounts.

Lastly, the narratives propagated by the clusters of inauthentic accounts focused on a range of topics relevant to the different target audiences. Still, all conveyed criticism of the activities of the governments of Russia, China, and Iran. Some were actively promoting the actions of the US as positive and beneficial:[9]

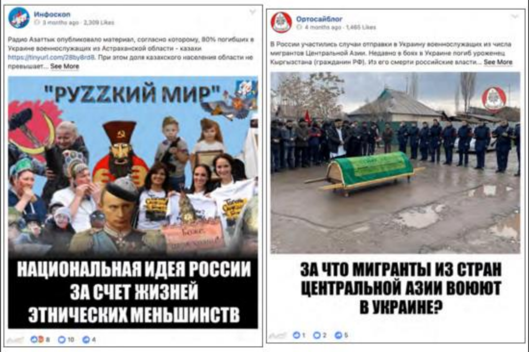


МедиаФильтр
4 months ago · 1,692 Likes
Китай продолжает политику геноцида, направленную на то, чтобы уничтожить мусульманскую идентичность на территории Синьцзяна. Он продолжает пополнять ужасающий список своих злодеяний всё новыми и...
See More

МедиаФильтр
1 month ago · 1,692 Likes
Китай с его растущим аппетитом на обесцененную российскую нефть стал ведущим спонсором войны Кремля против Украины, предоставив Москве надежный источник дохода, смягчающий воздействие жестких... See More

Китай продаёт органы мусульманских узников Синьцзяна
20 13 62
Китай стал главным спонсором войны России против Украины
0 0 7

Figure 24: Posts about alleged organ harvesting of Muslims in Xinjiang (left) and blaming China for being the main sponsor of Russia's war against Ukraine (right)

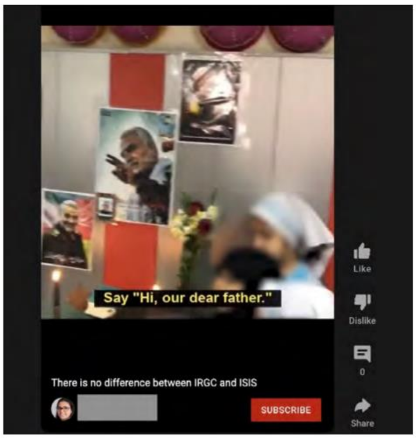


Инфоскоп
3 months ago · 2,309 Likes
Радио Азаттык опубликовало материал, согласно которому, 80% погибших в Украине военнослужащих из Астраханской области - казахи https://tinyurl.com/28by8rd8. При этом доля казахского населения области не превышает... See More

Ортосайблог
4 months ago · 1,465 Likes
В России участились случаи отправки в Украину военнослужащих из числа мигрантов Центральной Азии. Недавно в боях в Украине погиб уроженец Кыргызстана (гражданин РФ). Из его смерти российские власти... See More

"РУZZКИЙ МИР"
НАЦИОНАЛЬНАЯ ИДЕЯ РОССИИ ЗА СЧЕТ ЖИЗНЕЙ ЭТНИЧЕСКИХ МЕНЬШИНСТВ
8 10 4
ЗА ЧТО МИГРАНТЫ ИЗ СТРАН ЦЕНТРАЛЬНОЙ АЗИИ ВОЮЮТ В УКРАИНЕ?
1 2 5

Figure 19: Posts about Russia using ethnic minorities to fight in Ukraine (left) and the conscription of Central Asian migrants into the Russian military (right).



Say "Hi, our dear father."
There is no difference between IRGC and ISIS
SUBSCRIBE
Like
Dislike
0
Share

Figure 43: A YouTube Short shared by an account linked to the suspended Twitter and Meta assets compared the IRGC to the Islamic State group. The account profile photo is likely GAN-generated.

[9] Source: https://public-assets.graphika.com/reports/graphika_stanford_internet_observatory_report_unheard_voice.pdf

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