

Facebook, Twitter and Others Remove Pro-U.S. Influence Campaign

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By Sheera Frenkel and Tiffany Hsu

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SAN FRANCISCO — Facebook, Instagram, WhatsApp and Twitter have removed an influence operation from their networks that promoted U.S. foreign policy interests abroad, according to a report on Wednesday by researchers from the Stanford Internet Observatory and the research company Graphika.

It was the first time that an influence campaign pushing U.S. interests abroad had been discovered and taken down from the social media platforms. The operation, which ran for almost five years on eight social networks and messaging apps, promoted the views, values and goals of the United States while attacking the interests of Russia, China, Iran and other countries, the researchers found.

The accounts behind the operation often posed as news outlets or took on the personas of people who didn't exist, posting content in at least seven languages, including Russian, Arabic and Urdu. The posts criticized countries like Russia for engaging in “imperialist wars” in Syria and Africa, while praising American aid efforts in Central Asia and Iraq.

Meta, which owns Facebook, Instagram and WhatsApp, said the “country of origin” of the accounts was the United States, while Twitter said the “presumptive countries of origin” for the accounts were the United States and Britain, according to the report.

“It’s the first time we’ve seen something like this,” said Renée DiResta, research manager at the Stanford Internet Observatory. “It’s the first time we’ve seen a pro-U.S. foreign influence operation taken down by Twitter and Meta.”

Until Wednesday, influence operations backed by nation-states on social networks like Facebook and Twitter have been attributed mainly to Russia, China, Iran and other foreign adversaries of the United States. Russia pioneered many of these online disinformation tactics, using Facebook, Twitter and other social networks to spread divisive messaging among American voters in the 2016 presidential election. China has also used Facebook and Twitter to burnish its image and to undercut accusations of human rights abuses.

Researchers have long suspected that influence operations promoting U.S. interests abroad have been active, though no specific efforts had previously been documented and studied.

The U.S. government does not comment on covert programs. Brig. Gen. Pat Ryder, a Pentagon spokesman, said the agency “will look into and assess any information that Facebook or Twitter provides.”

Twitter and Meta, which do not permit accounts that covertly work together to promote certain narratives, removed the accounts in July and August, according to the report. The other platforms that were used in the operation were Telegram, Google’s YouTube, and the Russian social media networks VKontakte and Odnoklassniki.

Twitter said it had no comment on the Stanford and Graphika report. Meta did not respond to requests for comment. While the companies have regularly revealed influence operations they remove from their platforms, they have not published a report on the pro-U.S. campaign.

The only U.S. operations that Meta has previously named were domestic efforts, such as when the company revealed in October 2020 that a marketing firm, Rally Forge, was working with the conservative organization Turning Point USA to target Americans.

In an email, YouTube said it had terminated several channels posting in Arabic, Farsi and Russian to promote U.S. foreign affairs, including channels linked to a U.S. consulting firm, as part of an investigation into coordinated influence operations. It said its findings were similar to those in the Stanford and Graphika report.

Ms. DiResta said the tactics used in the pro-U.S. influence campaign resembled those used by China. While Russia often seeks to sow divisions in its online campaigns, China is more focused on promoting a rosy picture of life in the country, she said. With the pro-U.S. campaign, the goal was also “to show how awesome the U.S. was in comparison to the other countries,” she said.

The researchers were notified of the pro-U.S. online campaign by Meta and Twitter so they could analyze and study the activity, according to the report. The researchers found that the operation largely focused on messaging that favored the United States and the West through memes and false news stories, while criticizing Russia, China and Iran.

The accounts tailored their language and messaging to different regions, the researchers said. In one effort, a group of 12 Twitter accounts, 10 Facebook pages, 15 Facebook profiles and 10 Instagram accounts were created between June 2020 and March 2022 to focus on Central Asia. Some pretended to be media outlets with names like Vostochnaya Pravda. At least one account posed as an individual using a doctored profile photo based on an image of the Puerto Rican actress Valeria Menendez.

Those accounts then posted about the food shortages caused by Russia's invasion of Ukraine in Central Asian countries and cheered on pro-Ukrainian protests in those places.

Another set of 21 Twitter accounts, six Instagram accounts, five Facebook profiles and two Facebook pages targeted Iranian audiences between November 2020 and June 2022, according to the report. Some of the personas used profile pictures that were likely created using artificial intelligence. Many tried to present themselves as real people by interspersing Iranian poetry and photos of Persian food between political messages.

Posts from the effort claimed that the Iranian government took food from its citizens to give to the Hezbollah militant group, or highlighted embarrassing moments for the country, such as a power outage that reportedly caused the Iranian chess team to lose an international online tournament.

On Facebook and Instagram, dozens of posts also negatively compared opportunities for Iranian women with those for women abroad. Other messages criticized Iran's support for Russia's invasion of Ukraine and claimed that the stance would invite economic repercussions for Iranians.

Another group of accounts focused on the Middle East, applauded efforts by the U.S. Agency for International Development in Iraq and discussed positive interactions between American troops and Syrian children.

The group of accounts that focused on Central Asian countries also mentioned U.S.A.I.D. 94 times on Twitter and 384 times on Facebook, while hailing Washington as a reliable economic partner that could help reduce the region's dependence on Russia.

None of the campaigns reached a large audience. Most of the posts and tweets received a "handful" of likes or retweets, researchers noted, and only 19 percent of the covert accounts that were identified had over 1,000 followers.

Julian E. Barnes contributed reporting.