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POLITICSNATIONAL SECURITY

Meta, Twitter Remove Network of Accounts That Pushed Pro-Western Narratives

Activity is rare example of a covert influence operation that sought to boost U.S. and its allies; campaign had limited impact, researchers say

By *Dustin Volz* [Follow](#)

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Facebook parent Meta Platforms Inc. and Twitter Inc. have removed accounts that pushed pro-Western content to audiences in the Middle East and Russian-speaking Central Asia, including posts critical of Russia's invasion of Ukraine, according to a report released Wednesday.

The takedowns by two of the most prominent social-media companies mark some of the first instances of a covert online propaganda campaign that promoted Western ideas, rather than past efforts linked to authoritarian governments seeking to undermine the U.S. and its allies.

It wasn't clear who was behind the accounts, which Meta removed for violating its rules against "coordinated inauthentic behavior" and Twitter took down under its policies against platform manipulation and spam. Meta identified the U.S. as the "country of origin," while Twitter said the U.S. and the U.K. were the "presumptive countries of origin," the researchers said. The researchers also observed evidence suggesting possible connections to the U.S. military.

"This activity represents the most extensive case of a covert influence operation advancing pro-Western narratives that has been publicly documented to date," said Jack Stubbs, vice president of intelligence at Graphika, an information research firm that produced the report along with Stanford University's Internet Observatory. "It shows that beyond well-known actors linked to Russia, China and Iran, other groups with different motivations are using the same deceptive tactics in their attempts to infiltrate and sway online communities."

A Meta spokeswoman said the company had no additional information to share and referred to previous discussions from security executives on the difficulty of linking networks of fake accounts to specific groups or governments. The removals took place in July and August.



A Twitter spokeswoman said the report was independent from the company and that data is shared with outside researchers to support external analysis to inform the public.

“We will look into and assess any information that Facebook or Twitter provides,” Pentagon spokesman Air Force Brig. Gen. Pat Ryder said.

The posts, which appeared on Facebook, Instagram, Twitter and other social-media platforms, included anti-extremism messaging and sought to advocate for Western foreign policy, the report found. At other times the focus of some accounts was to highlight China’s treatment within its borders of Muslim minorities, particularly the Uyghurs in Xinjiang province.

More recently, posts—sometimes hundreds a day—criticized Russia’s decision to invade Ukraine, highlighting alleged atrocities committed by Russian troops. The social-media accounts shared news articles from media outlets funded by the U.S. government, including Voice of America and Radio Free Europe, and links to websites backed by the U.S. military.

In another burst of activity, the accounts criticized Russia’s relationship with the Taliban after it regained control of Afghanistan last year following the U.S. withdrawal, accusing Russia and China of ignoring its alleged human-rights abuses.



Meta and Twitter often share information with private-sector researchers concerning potential abuse of its platforms, but typically refrain from sharing granular technical data and didn't do so this time. That limited researchers' ability to attribute the activity to a specific government or group, the researchers said.

Some clues pointed to the possible involvement of the U.S. government or a government contractor. Twitter shared a data set with researchers of about 300,000 tweets from 146 accounts from March 2012 to February 2022. The researchers linked some of the accounts to an overt Obama-era U.S. government messaging campaign that was run by the U.S. military but was widely seen as ineffective and was later stripped of funding by Congress. Other accounts appeared to be part of a covert campaign of unclear origin.

The researchers focused solely on the covert campaign, but noted "some low-level open-source connections between the overt and covert activity in the combined Twitter and Meta data" that included content sharing between the overt and covert groups. For example, one Twitter account that falsely posed as someone in Iraq had previously claimed to operate for the U.S. military.

Social-media companies have developed a patchwork of policies in recent years to guard their platforms against accounts with fake identities or that send out spam messages in coordination with other accounts, even if the content itself isn't outright disinformation. Such efforts received substantial investment following Russia's interference in the 2016 U.S. presidential election, which in part relied on troll farms that created fake accounts to inject divisive political content into American voters' social media feeds. Russia has denied interfering in U.S. elections.

Since then, social-media companies have routinely identified fake networks of accounts pushing propaganda either directly on behalf of foreign governments or in support of them. Those nearly always have been linked to Russia, China, Iran, India and a number of other non-Western nations. One exception occurred in 2020 when Facebook removed a network of accounts linked to the French military that targeted audiences in Africa.

The newly disclosed campaigns appeared to have a minimal impact. Just 19% of the covert accounts attracted more than 1,000 followers, the report said. The vast majority of posts and tweets received only a handful of likes or retweets, which “illustrates the limitations of using these inauthentic tactics,” Mr. Stubbs said.

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