Bots Are Flooding Social Media with Pro-US Propaganda Demonizing China, Russia & Iran, Studies Show

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Scientific studies show huge numbers of bots are spreading pro-Western disinformation on social media, demonizing China, Russia, and Iran. 90% of bots posting about the proxy war in Ukraine push pro-NATO propaganda.

Two studies published this August expose how large numbers of fake accounts are spreading pro-Western and pro-NATO propaganda on social media, while demonizing US geopolitical adversaries like China, Russia, and Iran.

An investigation by scholars in Australia found that more than 90% of bots posting on Twitter about the proxy war in Ukraine were promoting pro-Ukraine propaganda, whereas just 7% were promoting pro-Russia propaganda.

A separate report co-authored by researchers at California's Stanford University and a notorious US government contractor called Graphika revealed a large propaganda network on social media "that used deceptive tactics to promote pro-Western narratives in the Middle East and Central Asia."

The study detailed a "series of covert campaigns" on social media, which spread disinformation and fake news in a way that "consistently advanced narratives promoting the interests of the United States and its allies while opposing countries including Russia, China, and Iran."

These two investigations are part of a growing body of evidence showing how Western governments and their allies have weaponized social media platforms and turned them into weapons in a new cold war.

90% of bots posting about Ukraine proxy spread anti-Russian propaganda

A scientific study published by researchers from [Australia's University of Adelaide](#) found that, of the bots on Twitter posting about the proxy war in Ukraine, 90.16% spread pro-Ukraine propaganda, while only 6.8% spread pro-Russia propaganda. (3.04% of the bots showed what they called "mixed behaviour," publishing both pro-Ukrainian and pro-Russian messages.)

The scholars, from the university's School of Mathematical Sciences, cannot in any way be considered pro-Russian. In fact, two of the co-authors disclosed that their work is funded by the Australian government through the Australian Research Council's Discovery Projects.

But the academics set out to investigate how "Both sides in the Ukrainian conflict use the online information environment to influence geopolitical dynamics and sway public opinion," and they let the facts speak for themselves.

The researchers analyzed more than 5.2 million tweets, retweets, quote tweets, and replies between February 23 and March 8 that used the hashtags #(I)StandWithUkraine, #(I)StandWithRussia, #(I)StandWithZelenskyy, #(I)StandWithPutin, #(I)SupportUkraine, or #(I)SupportRussia. (The scholars used both the versions #StandWithUkraine and #IStandWithUkraine, with and without the "I.")
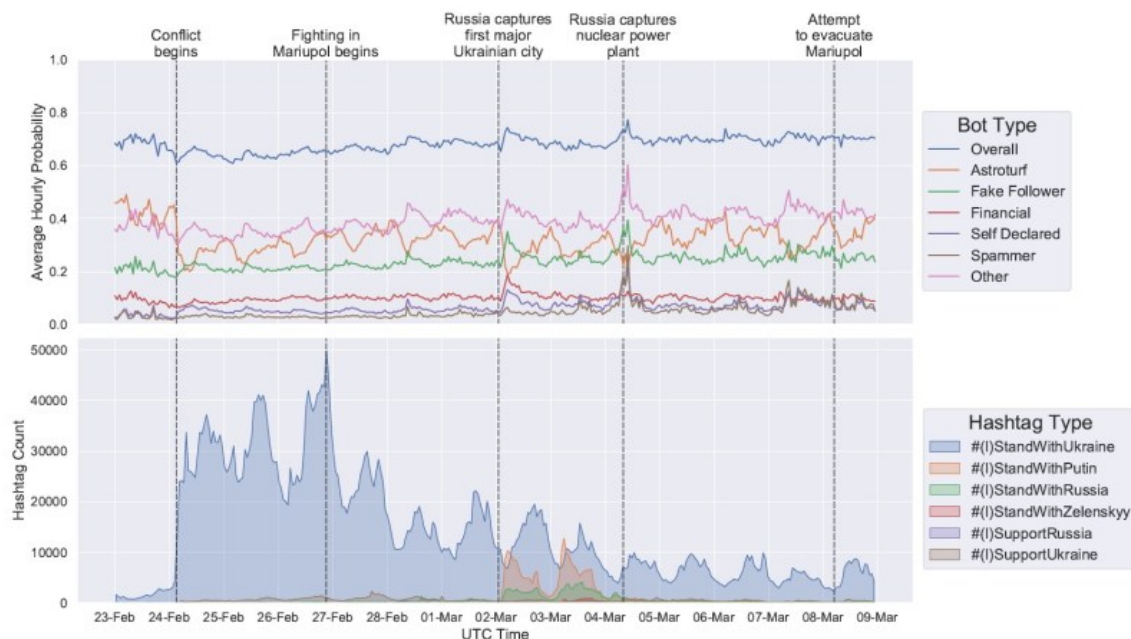
They found that the vast majority of bots tweeted pro-Ukraine propaganda, specifically the hashtag #StandWithUkraine.

Their study noted that the proxy war in Ukraine "emphasises the role social media plays in modern-day warfare, with conflict occurring in both the physical and information environments."

"Social media is a critical tool in information warfare," the academics wrote.

They cited another investigation that found that 19% of overall interactions on Twitter are directed from bots to real accounts, the vast majority in the form of retweets (74%) and

mentions (25%).

Pro-Western propaganda network on social media exposed

A separate study also published in August offered further insight into how social media is weaponized to spread pro-Western propaganda.

Titled "Unheard Voice: Evaluating five years of pro-Western covert influence operations," the report was co-authored by the Stanford Internet Observatory and an infamous intelligence company called Graphika.

Graphika is notorious for working closely with the US government, contracting with the Pentagon, DARPA, and the Senate Intelligence Committee.

Given its links to US intelligence agencies, Graphika's role in this study could be seen as an example of a "limited hangout" – it provides a small glimpse into US information warfare activities, while covering up the vast majority of its operations.

Although it is very limited in scope and has clear biases, the document does show how pro-Western propaganda networks on social media accuse China, Russia, and Iran of being "imperialist" while praising the US government.

The pro-Western disinformation operations primarily used Facebook, Instagram, and WhatsApp (which are owned by Meta), as well as YouTube, Twitter, and Telegram.

Some of the fake accounts involved in the coordinated propaganda campaign posed as "independent news outlets," "political analysts," or "teachers."

The Stanford Internet Observatory and Graphika succiently described the operation as "Fake News, Fake Faces, Fake Followers."

They wrote in the executive summary of their report (emphasis added):

> Our joint investigation found an interconnected web of accounts on Twitter, Facebook, Instagram, and five other social media platforms that used deceptive tactics to promote pro-Western narratives in the Middle East and Central Asia. The platforms' datasets appear to cover a series of covert campaigns over a period of almost five years rather than one homogeneous operation.

> These campaigns consistently advanced narratives promoting the interests of the United States and its allies while opposing countries including Russia, China, and Iran. The accounts heavily criticized Russia in particular for the deaths of innocent civilians and other atrocities its soldiers committed in pursuit of the Kremlin's "imperial ambitions" following its invasion of Ukraine in February this year. To promote this and other narratives, the accounts sometimes shared news articles from U.S. government-funded media outlets, such as Voice of America and Radio Free Europe, and links to websites sponsored by the U.S. military.

The document explained that the propaganda accounts "created fake personas with GAN-generated faces, posed as independent media outlets, leveraged memes and short-form videos, attempted to start hashtag campaigns, and launched online petitions."

The Stanford Internet Observatory and Graphika described their investigation as "the most extensive case of covert pro-Western IO [influence operations] on social media to be reviewed and analyzed by open-source researchers to date."

The firms acknowledged that, "With few exceptions, the study of modern IO has overwhelmingly focused on activity linked to" Western adversaries "in countries such as Russia, China, and Iran."

Some of the language used in the report reflects the blatant bias of the firms, which referred to China, Russia, and Iran disparagingly as "authoritarian regimes."

Despite the many limitations of the study, however, the fact that it was co-published by an elite university and a notorious intelligence-linked US government contractor makes it impossible to deny that Western government are using social media platforms to spread disinformation and wage information warfare against their geopolitical adversaries.

Central Asia propaganda accuses China and Russia of 'imperialism' while praising the US

The Stanford Internet Observatory and Graphika investigation analyzed the pro-Western disinformation campaign by dividing its work into three regions: Central Asia (primarily in the Russian language), Iran (in Persian), and the Middle East (in Arabic).

Although these pro-Western propaganda operations were conducted in different languages, many of their talking points and tactics overlapped.

The Central Asia-themed disinformation was mostly in Russian, although some accounts posted in regional languages like Kazakh and Kyrgyz.

In addition to using Facebook, Instagram, WhatsApp, YouTube, Twitter, and Telegram, the Central Asia propaganda also employed the Russian social media apps VKontakte (VK) and Odnoklassniki.

Figure 17: Posts about the U.S. helping Tajikistan secure its border with Afghanistan (left) and presenting the U.S. as the main guarantor of Central Asia's stability and sovereignty (right).

The report found that the disinformation operation involved creating a "sham media outlet" focused on Central Asia called Intergazeta. It "repeatedly copied news material with and without credit from reputable Western and pro-Western sources in Russian, such as Meduza.io and the BBC Russian Service."

Other accounts in the propaganda network "copied or translated content from U.S.-funded entities, such as Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, and the independent Kazakh news outlet informburo.kz."

They also created petitions using the US-based website Avaaz. One demanded that Kazakhstan should leave the Eurasian Economic Union (EEU) and Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO), a military alliance with Russia.

Another petition called on Kyrgyzstan to minimize Chinese influence. And two more insisted that Kazakhstan should ban Russian TV channels.

	Стенгазета	🇰🇿 В Казахстане была создана петиция, призывающая правительство страны к запрету вещания телеканалов РФ в связи с распространяемой ими дезинформации относительно российского вторжения в Украину. Согласно мнению авторов	MAR 6, 2022	10
	Шестигранник	На фоне беспрецедентного количества прокремлевской пропаганды, которой сопровождаются военные действия РФ в Украине, граждане Казахстана запустили петицию с требованием остановить вещание российских телеканалов на	MAR 6, 2022	2
	Ортосайблог	В Казахстане запустили петицию с призывом остановить вещание российских пропагандистских телеканалов, которые оправдывают военную агрессию России в Украине: https://bit.ly/3sJ.6Hur:=https://secure.avaaz.org/community_petitic	MAR 6, 2022	5
			MAR 6, 2022	1
	Пульс Востока	Кремлевская политика умолчания, дезинформации и пропаганды стала особенно характерной при освещении военных действий на Украине для аудитории внутри России и за ее пределами. Жители Казахстана, озабоченные	MAR 4, 2022	77

Figure 16: CrowdTangle shows the assets were the first to share petitions calling for the Kazakh government to ban Russian TV channels.

The Central Asia disinformation network accused Russia and China of "imperialism," while constantly spreading pro-US propaganda.

The fake accounts demonized Russia for its invasion of Ukraine, its military intervention in Syria, and its security partnership with several African nations.

The Stanford Internet Observatory and Graphika report noted that the disinformation operation also "concentrated on China and the treatment of Chinese Muslim minorities, particularly the Uighurs in Xinjiang province."

The fake accounts accused China of "genocide" against its Uyghur minority, and spread fake news stories alleging that Beijing harvest the organs of Muslims.

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)

Persian-language anti-Iran propaganda network

The report identified another network of propaganda focused on Afghanistan. These fake accounts attacked Iran and accused it of having too much influence in the neighboring country. To do so, they posted disinformation from websites supported by the US military.

This propaganda included outlandish fake news, alleging for instance that Iran is trafficking the organs of Afghan refugees, or claiming that Tehran is supposedly forcing Afghan refugees to fight in militias in Syria and Yemen.

Figure 41: An article on a U.S. military-linked domain alleged that Afghan refugees were having their organs harvested in Iran.

Like the Central Asia-focused disinformation operation, this anti-Iran network included "accounts claiming to be independent media outlets, [which] shared U.S.-funded Persian-language media," from US state propaganda outlets like Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty's Radio Farda and VOA Farsi.

The fake accounts also shared "content from sources linked to the U.S. military," such as websites sponsored by U.S. Central Command (CENTCOM).

And they reposted material from Iran International, an anti-Iranian propaganda outlet based in Britain and funded by the Saudi monarchy.

The Stanford Internet Observatory and Graphika wrote that this propaganda campaign was "critical of the Iranian government and often used a sarcastic tone to mock Iranian state media and other parts of the state apparatus."

Some of the fake accounts engaged with actual Iranians on Twitter, trying to get real people involved in the operation.

They emphasized attacks on Tehran's foreign policy. The report noted, "Anti-government accounts criticized Iran's domestic and international policies and highlighted how the government's costly international interventions undermined its ability to care for its citizens."

The fake accounts excoriated the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC), demonized resistance groups such as Hezbollah and Hamas, and condemned Iran for its political alliance with Russia.

Figure 37: A cartoon from an article on darichenews.com. The cartoon is branded with the Dariche News name in the top left corner. The text says: "IRGC: Greatest threat to the Middle East." The image shows Khamenei as an octopus spreading his tentacles around the Middle East with missiles, police batons, and nooses. Notably, the article accompanying this cartoon includes a quote from a former CENTCOM commander.

Arabic-language Middle East propaganda network

Another disinformation network identified in the Stanford Internet Observatory and Graphika report focused on spreading Arabic-language propaganda related to Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, and Yemen.

These fake accounts claimed Iran had too much influence in the region. They demonized Yemen's revolutionary group Ansarallah (also known as the Houthi movement), and attacked Russia's foreign policy.

The report noted that some "accounts on Twitter posed as Iraqi activists in order to accuse Iran of threatening Iraq's water security and flooding the country with crystal meth."

"Other assets highlighted Houthi-planted landmines killing civilians and promoted allegations that Russia's invasion of Ukraine would lead to a global food crisis," it added.

Figure 55: An asset in the group shared on Twitter a cartoon depicting Iranian influence as a disease destroying Iraq.

Some of the accounts falsely posed as Iraqis, and compared Iran to a "disease" destroying Iraq.

At the same time, they demonized Iraqi Shia militias and portrayed them as puppets of Tehran.

The propaganda campaign accused Iran of an "imperialist project in the Middle East."

The report noted that this disinformation operation also "amplified the narrative that Russian President Vladimir Putin planned to induce a global food crisis that would hit less economically developed countries the hardest."

At the same time, the fake accounts praised the United States, and particularly its soft-power arm USAID.

Part of the disinformation network even spread propaganda heroizing the US soldiers who are illegally occupying Syrian territory.

Figure 57: A Facebook post from an asset in the group showed U.S. soldiers meeting children in Syria.

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