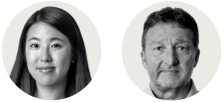


China's Advancing Efforts to Influence the U.S. Election Raise Alarms

China has adopted some of the same misinformation tactics that Russia used ahead of the 2016 election, researchers and government officials say.



By Tiffany Hsu and Steven Lee Myers

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Covert Chinese accounts are masquerading online as American supporters of former President Donald J. Trump, promoting conspiracy theories, stoking domestic divisions and attacking President Biden ahead of the election in November, according to researchers and government officials.

The accounts signal a potential tactical shift in how Beijing aims to influence American politics, with more of a willingness to target specific candidates and parties, including Mr. Biden.

In an echo of Russia's influence campaign before the 2016 election, China appears to be trying to harness partisan divisions to undermine the Biden administration's policies, despite recent efforts by the two countries to lower the temperature in their relations.

Some of the Chinese accounts impersonate fervent Trump fans, including one on X that purported to be "a father, husband and son" who was "MAGA all the way!!" The accounts mocked Mr. Biden's age and shared fake images of him in a prison

jumpsuit, or claimed that Mr. Biden was a Satanist pedophile while promoting Mr. Trump's "Make America Great Again" slogan.

"I've never seen anything along those lines at all before," said Elise Thomas, a senior analyst at the Institute for Strategic Dialogue, a nonprofit research organization that uncovered a small group of the fake accounts posing as Trump supporters.

Ms. Thomas and other researchers have linked the new activity to a long-running network of accounts connected with the Chinese government known as Spamouflage. Several of the accounts they detailed previously posted pro-Beijing content in Mandarin — only to resurface in recent months under the guise of real Americans writing in English.

In a separate project, the Foundation for Defense of Democracies, a research organization in Washington, identified 170 inauthentic pages and accounts on Facebook that have also pushed anti-American messages, including pointed attacks on Mr. Biden.

The effort has more successfully attracted actual users' attention and become more difficult for researchers to identify than previous Chinese efforts to influence public opinion in the United States. Though researchers say the overall political tilt of the campaign remains unclear, it has raised the possibility that China's government is calculating that a second Trump presidency, despite his sometimes hostile statements against the country, might be preferable to a second Biden term.

China's activity has already raised alarms inside the American government.

In February, the Office of the Director of National Intelligence reported that China was expanding its influence campaigns to "sow doubts about U.S. leadership, undermine democracy and extend Beijing's influence." The report expressed concern that Beijing could use increasingly sophisticated methods to try to influence the American election "to sideline critics of China."

Liu Pengyu, the spokesman for the Chinese Embassy in Washington, said in a statement that the presidential election was “the domestic affair of the United States” and that “China is committed to the principle of noninterference.”

“Claims about China influencing U.S. presidential elections are completely fabricated,” he added.

Ms. Thomas, who has studied China’s information operations for years, said the new effort suggested a more subtle and sophisticated approach than previous campaigns. It was the first time, she said, that she had encountered Chinese accounts posing so persuasively as Trump-supporting Americans while managing to attract genuine engagement.

“The worry has always been, what if one day they wake up and are effective?” she said. “Potentially, this could be the beginning of them waking up and being effective.”

Online disinformation experts are looking ahead to the months before the November election with growing anxiety.

Intelligence assessments show Russia using increasingly subtle influence tactics in the United States to spread its case for isolationism as its war against Ukraine continues. Mock news sites are targeting Americans with Russian propaganda.

Efforts to beat back false narratives and conspiracy theories — already a difficult task — must now also contend with waning moderation efforts at social media platforms, political pushback, fast-advancing artificial intelligence technology and broad information fatigue.

Until now, China’s efforts to advance its ideology in the West struggled to gain traction, first as it pushed its official propaganda about the superiority of its culture and economy and later as it began denigrating democracy and stoking anti-American sentiment.

In the 2022 midterm elections, the cybersecurity firm Mandiant reported that Dragonbridge, an influence campaign linked to China, tried to discourage Americans from voting while highlighting U.S. political polarization. That campaign, which experimented with fake American personas posting content in the first person, was poorly executed and largely overlooked online, researchers said.

The recent campaigns connected to China have sought to exploit the divisions already apparent in American politics, joining the divisive debate over issues such as gay rights, immigration and crime mainly from a right-wing perspective.

In February, according to the Institute for Strategic Dialogue, a Chinese-linked account on X calling itself a Western name alongside a “MAGA 2024” reference shared a video from RT, the Russian television network controlled by the Kremlin, to claim that Mr. Biden and the Central Intelligence Agency had sent a neo-Nazi gangster to fight in Ukraine. (That narrative was debunked by the investigative group Bellingcat.)

The next day the post received an enormous boost when Alex Jones, the podcaster known for spreading false claims and conspiracy theories, shared it on the platform with his 2.2 million followers.

The account with the “MAGA 2024” reference had taken steps to appear authentic, describing itself as being run by a 43-year-old Trump supporter in Los Angeles. But it used a profile photo lifted from a Danish man’s travel blog, the institute’s report on the accounts said. Although the account opened 14 years ago, its first publicly visible post was last April. In that post, the account attempted, without evidence, to link Mr. Biden to Jeffrey Epstein, the disgraced financier and registered sex offender.

At least four other similar accounts are also operating, Ms. Thomas said, all of them with ties to China. One account paid for a subscription on X, which offers perks like better promotion and a blue check mark that was, before Elon Musk

bought the platform, a sign of verification conferred to users whose identities had been verified. Like the other accounts, it shared pro-Trump and anti-Biden claims, including the QAnon conspiracy theory and baseless election fraud accusations.

The posts included exhortations to “be strong ourselves, not smear China and create rumors,” awkward phrases like “how dare?” instead of “how dare you?” and signs that the user’s web browser had been set to Mandarin.

One of the accounts seemed to slip up in May when it responded to another post in Mandarin; another was posting primarily in Mandarin until last spring, when it briefly went silent before resurfacing with all-English content. The accounts denounced efforts by American lawmakers to ban the popular TikTok app, which is owned by the Chinese company ByteDance, as a form of “true authoritarianism” orchestrated by Israel and as a tool for Mr. Biden to undermine China.

The accounts sometimes amplified or repeated content from the Chinese influence campaign Spamouflage, which was first identified in 2019 and linked to an arm of the Ministry of Public Security. It once posted content almost exclusively in Chinese to attack the Communist Party’s critics and protesters in Hong Kong.

It has pivoted in recent years to focus on the United States, portraying the country as overwhelmed by chaos. By 2020, it was posting in English and criticizing American foreign policy, as well as domestic issues in the United States, including its response to Covid-19 and natural disasters, like the wildfires in Hawaii last year.

China, which has denied interfering in other countries’ internal affairs, now appears to be building a network of accounts across many platforms to put to use in November. “This is reminiscent of Russia’s style of operations, but the difference is more the intensity of this operation,” said Margot Fulde-Hardy, a former analyst at Viginum, the government agency in France that combats disinformation online.

In the past, many Spamouflage accounts followed one another, posted sloppily in several languages and simultaneously blitzed social media users with identical messages across multiple platforms.

The newer accounts are trickier to find because they are trying to build an organic following and appear to be controlled by humans rather than automated bots. One of the accounts on X also had linked profiles on Instagram and Threads, creating an appearance of authenticity.

Meta, which owns Instagram and Threads, last year removed thousands of inauthentic accounts linked to Spamouflage on Facebook and others on Instagram. It called one network it had removed “the largest known cross-platform influence operation to date.” Hundreds of related accounts remained on other platforms, including TikTok, X, LiveJournal and Blogspot, Meta said.

The Foundation for Defense of Democracies documented a new coordinated group of Chinese accounts linked to a Facebook page with 3,000 followers called the War of Somethings. The report underscores the persistence of China’s efforts despite Meta’s repeated efforts to take down Spamouflage accounts.

“What we’re seeing,” said Max Lesser, a senior analyst with the foundation, “is the campaign just continues, undeterred.”

Tiffany Hsu reports on misinformation and disinformation and its origins, movement and consequences. She has been a journalist for more than two decades. [More about Tiffany Hsu](#)

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