



Graphika

Spamouflage Breakout

Chinese Spam Network Finally Starts to
Gain Some Traction

Ben Nimmo, Ira Hubert and Yang Cheng

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Information Operations

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Executive Summary

The sprawling pro-Chinese propaganda network that Graphika has dubbed “Spamouflage” and [exposed multiple times](#) over the past two years has begun to break out of its echo chamber of fake accounts and reach real social media users, including some heavyweight influencers, with hundreds of videos that praise China, criticize the United States, and attack the Hong Kong pro-democracy movement and exiled Chinese billionaire Guo Wengui.

The network’s successes are still sporadic - a few tweets have reached viral influencers, and a few dozen videos on YouTube channels have garnered significant followings - but, for the first time, its content has had measurable reach. Moreover, the audiences it has reached are widespread and include influencers in Latin America, Pakistan, the United Kingdom, and Hong Kong. Combined with the sheer scale of the network, and the fact that it has reconstituted itself after repeated takedowns, these features mark Spamouflage as a persistent and increasingly assertive online presence with a limited but growing ability to engage real users.

This is Graphika’s fourth report on Spamouflage, following our [initial exposure](#) of the network’s activity on YouTube, Twitter and Facebook in September 2019, its [pivot](#) to comment on COVID-19 in February 2020 and its launch of [English-language videos](#) in June 2020. Throughout the last six months, the three platforms have taken down swathes of Spamouflage assets, often within hours of posting. Nevertheless, the network has persisted and evolved. Our latest report is prompted by several key developments.

First is the fact that Spamouflage has finally begun to break out of the echo chamber of fake accounts that it controls. We use the phrase “begun to” advisedly: only a handful of assets, out of the many thousands that the network has deployed, have successfully engaged real users. Nevertheless, in the past three months Spamouflage has been amplified by, among others, the Venezuelan Foreign Minister, a Pakistani politician, a senior figure at Huawei Europe, UK commentator and former member of parliament George Galloway, and four YouTube channels for Chinese viewers with tens of thousands of followers. This is the first time that we have observed Spamouflage content reaching external audiences in this way.

Second, and underpinning the first point, is a tactical shift. While Spamouflage continued to use hundreds of fake accounts with little or no attempt at persona development, it began in parallel to experiment with persona accounts which looked and behaved as though they were real people, and thus gave a veneer of authenticity to what they posted. Such accounts included ones that looked like photogenic celebrities; Chinese mainland commentators known to support CCP rule over Hong Kong and Taiwan; an American businessman; a Latin American soap opera; and young women interested in geopolitics (increasingly a Spamouflage speciality). These accounts facilitated genuine engagement with the content, and were the main drivers of its impact.

Third is the fact that Spamouflage is increasingly entwined with Chinese state officials and narratives. In the past five months, the network has expanded the number of themes it covers to include issues such as U.S.-China rivalry, arms control, and economic development. Videos posted by the network closely tracked with Chinese official messaging: for example, after President Xi Jinping [celebrated](#) the 30th anniversary of the “development and opening-up” of Shanghai’s Pudong district on November 12, Spamouflage assets posted several videos in English and Chinese celebrating the district. After reports emerged on January 14 of the [low efficacy](#) of China’s COVID-19 vaccine, Spamouflage began launching videos that questioned the safety of the U.S.-made Pfizer-BioNTech vaccine.

Hundreds of times in recent months, Spamouflage Twitter accounts have been amplified by Chinese diplomats. There is no evidence to suggest that the diplomats were knowingly promoting content from fake accounts, but Spamouflage increasingly resembles a state-aligned propaganda network that boosts, and is boosted by, the Chinese government.

Fourth, and a related point: Spamouflage is developing an increasingly aggressive and confrontational tone towards the United States. More videos portrayed the U.S. in a negative light than focused on any other theme, presenting it as law-breaking, hegemonic, racked by civil strife, and failing in the fight against COVID-19. Six English-language videos mentioned “civil war” in the headline; two called the U.S. the “greatest threat” to world peace. After anti-democracy rioters stormed the U.S. Capitol on January 6 and left five people dead, Spamouflage responded with videos that called it a “beautiful sight,” a mocking reference to the way [U.S. House Speaker Nancy Pelosi](#) described the pro-democracy movement in Hong Kong (Chinese state outlet the Global Times made the [same point](#)). Just days after Joe Biden’s inauguration, one Spamouflage video claimed that America’s political tensions “made the world see the hypocrisy and unbearable [sic] of ‘American democracy’ again.” At least two others defended China’s sanctioning of 28 U.S. politicians for “violating China’s sovereignty.”

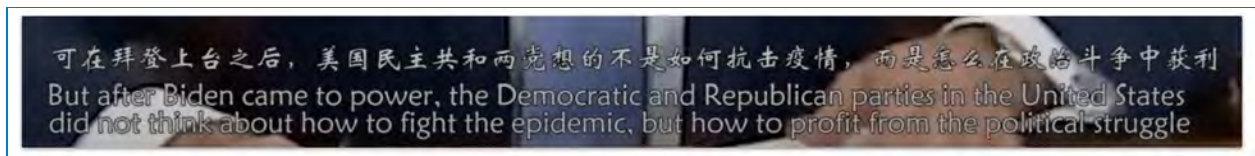
This reflects the broader rhetorical escalation between the United States and China over the past six months, and does not appear to have been assuaged by the change of U.S. administration. If U.S.-China tensions continue, Spamouflage is likely to continue the drumbeat of confrontation.

Fifth is the sheer volume of content this network produces. Between February 9, 2020, and January 26, 2021, assets that we can attribute to the Spamouflage network with high confidence posted over 1,400 unique videos in Mandarin, Cantonese, or English with Chinese subtitles. Many more remain to be discovered. They typically reacted to world events within 36 hours, or even less: a Spamouflage video on November 6, 2020, referenced protests in New York on November 5, while a Spamouflage video on January 7, 2021, included footage of the US Capitol riots that had happened just 17 hours earlier. The volume and speed of content suggests a network with significant resources.

Finally, one point about the network’s U.S. targeting deserves attention. As noted above, it frequently attacked the United States. In the summer of 2020, many of those attacks were aimed

at then-President Donald Trump. By contrast, in October and November, Trump was barely mentioned, and the brunt of the attacks fell on the “worst Secretary of State in history” (a term Spamouflage used repeatedly), Mike Pompeo. After Biden’s inauguration, some videos continued to attack Trump and Pompeo, but others attacked the Democratic Party. The unifying theme that underlay such posts was that America is broken, and American democracy is not a model that any country should emulate, regardless of which party rules in Washington: the storming of the Capitol “tore the false mask of American democracy to pieces,” as one video narration stated.

In essence, rather than being a vehicle for election interference, Spamouflage is a cheerleader for Chinese state narratives of China’s rise and America’s fall.



Screenshot from Spamouflage video “Politics is supreme, old wine in a new bottle政治至上换汤不换药,” January 26, 2021. The caption reads, “But after Biden came to power, the Democratic and Republican parties in the United States did not think about how to fight the epidemic, but how to profit from the political struggle.”



Screenshot of a video [tweeted](#) by the fourth incarnation of Spamouflage persona Li Ruoshui, January 10, 2021, referencing the storming of the Capitol, “which tore the false mask of American democracy to pieces.”

Part One: Breaking Out

Since Graphika first exposed Spamouflage in September 2019, one of the network's key characteristics has been its lack of impact. Across platforms, and throughout 2019 and the first half of 2020, the only comments, replies and shares on its posts that we identified were engagements from other members of the network.

In the second half of 2020, however, Spamouflage broke out of its bubble. Its videos began to reach genuine users, and were amplified on Twitter by Chinese officials, foreign politicians and verified accounts with audiences in Pakistan and Latin America, and on YouTube by a handful of channels with tens of thousands of followers that promote the Chinese government's point of view on Hong Kong, Taiwan and military issues. (The same breakout has not been observed on Facebook, where the network remained voluminous and spammy but low-impact.)

On Twitter, the drivers of this change were a small number of "personality" accounts, sometimes hijacked from authentic users, that interspersed Spamouflage videos with retweets of official Chinese state accounts. Unlike Spamouflage's typical lightly disguised fakes, the personality accounts had more apparent individuality and a more developed persona, giving them enough of a veneer of authenticity to withstand a casual glance. They were also more persistent, and when one account was taken down, the operation quickly launched a new one with the same name.

Such "personality" accounts provided the bridge between the vast mass of Spamouflage content and authentic users. Graphika identified a dozen different personality accounts on Twitter (compared with the hundreds of simple fakes). Some had no discernible impact, but a very few made considerable inroads and landed the operation's content, finally, in front of real audiences.

Twitter: Celebrity Amplification

- Spamuouflage Twitter accounts were amplified by a number of high-profile Chinese diplomats, including Deputy Foreign Ministry Spokesman Lijian Zhao;
- They were also amplified by high-profile verified accounts including the Venezuelan Foreign Minister and politicians in Venezuela, Pakistan and the UK.

贺景润 He Jingrun

The most important Spamuouflage account on Twitter was called @jingrunhe, screen name “贺景润 He Jingrun.” This account was created on July 7, 2009, but its first recorded tweet was only posted on January 7, 2020. This was soon after the United States killed Iranian General Qasem Soleimani: the first tweet reacted to a Chinese-language comment on the killing.



The first known tweet by @jingrunhe, January 7, 2020.

The account had a young woman as its profile picture; Graphika found a larger version of the same picture, complete with a caption, on a Chinese [page](#) called “女生文字控伤感微信头像图片”

(“Girl sentimental WeChat avatar profile picture”) dated February 18, 2019. An even earlier version was uploaded to a photo collection on website 9596.org on September 6, 2017 (the URL of the [image](#) included the embedded date).



Left, He Jingrun. Right, the same image from 9596.org on September 6, 2017, complete with caption that reads (freely translated), “Your eyes are getting darker and darker, white water tastes like wine, you don't have tears, you are just thinking of someone.” The caption itself is a phrase that [circulates online](#) independently of the photo.

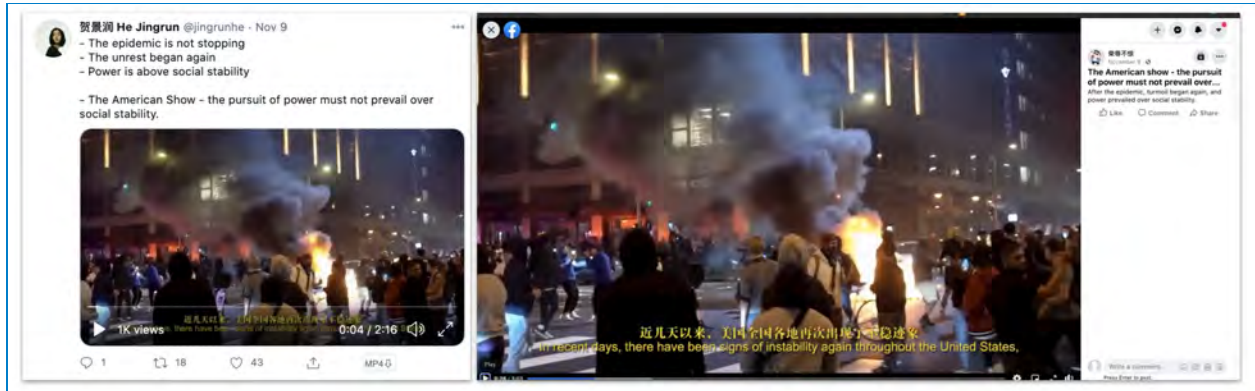
He Jingrun repeatedly posted Spamouflage videos in English, Mandarin or Cantonese. The account sometimes posted these without a title sequence, most likely to obscure its relationship to the broader operation, but other Spamouflage assets posted the same videos complete with titles, allowing for verification.

On November 25, for example, the He Jingrun account tweeted a video that praised China's development. The headline was missing, but other Spamouflage assets posted the complete version with the title, “China's development, the journey of the times.”



Left, video tweet by @jingrunhe, without headline. Right, Spamouflage video "China's development, the journey of the times," from a short-lived Spamouflage YouTube channel.

On November 9, He Jingrun posted another Spamouflage video. Once again, the title sequence was missing, but this time the tweet text itself gave the headline: "The American Show - the pursuit of power must not prevail over social stability." Other Spamouflage accounts shared the same video complete with the title sequence.



Left, tweet by @jingrunhe of "The American Show - the pursuit of power must not prevail over social stability." Right, the same video on a Spamouflage Facebook page.

Not all He Jinrun's tweets were Spamouflage videos. Some were apparently original text comments: these showed a strong alignment with Chinese government messaging on issues including Hong Kong, Taiwan, relations with the United States, U.S. sanctions, and China's increasingly troubled relationship with Australia - including the accusation of war crimes against Australian troops.

贺景润 He Jingrun @jingrunhe · Dec 10
 最大的人权应该是生存权，美国新冠肺炎感染者和死亡者世界第一，热切还在不断增加。一个连自己国家人民生命都保护不了的国家，有什么脸面谈人权。美国和西方的人权，不过是干涉他国内政的“狼牙棒”。病毒既是天灾又是人祸，更主要的是人祸。美国人民确实应该“大胆说，站出来”！

美国驻华使馆 US MissionCN @USA_China_Talk · Dec 9
 美国政府账号
 值此国际人权日之际，加入美国国务院直播互动，聆听专家讨论表达自由和公民参与在一个自由社会中的至关重要的作用>>明天（12月10日）晚8:00（美国东部标准时间早7:00），在：Facebook.com/StateDRL #HumanRightsDay

4 2 18

贺景润 He Jingrun @jingrunhe · Dec 10
 做“战狼”又何妨？针对外媒指责中国“战狼外交”，外交部发言人回应，中国不是随便可捏的软柿子，核心利益受损不可能当沉默羔羊。不卑不亢，对等反制，维护的是国家利益，捍卫的是国际公义。中国人民不惹事也不怕事，攻击中国却妄想中国忍气吞声，这样的如意算盘不必再打了！

3 11 39

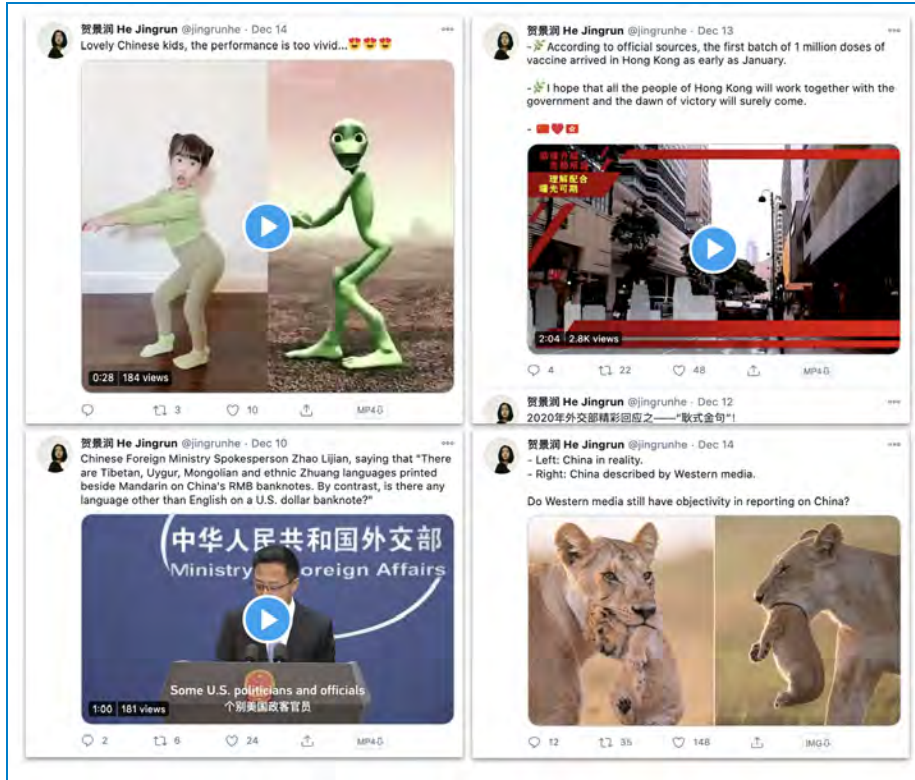
贺景润 He Jingrun @jingrunhe · Nov 16
 加拿大驻联合国大使称中国迫害新疆维吾尔族人，赵立坚：要刷存在感，先做好家庭作业，以免笑大方！

356 views 0:10 / 1:49

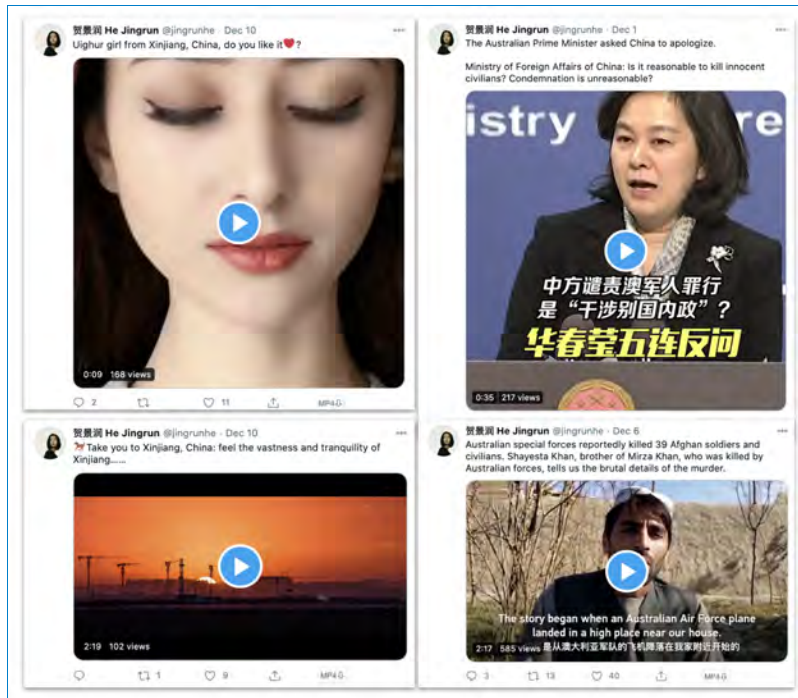
贺景润 He Jingrun @jingrunhe · Nov 23
 【黄之锋等三名反中乱港分子认罪！】
 黄之锋1996年出生，是香港近来活跃的“港独骨干”之一，虽年少，但其“独行累”。他甘当境外反华势力的“马前卒”，乐此不疲地做棋子，隔三岔五地告洋状，近年来，黄之锋连续窜访美国、德国，不断谰言“香港不是中国的一部分”，坐实了他就是个摇尾乞食的“洋奴才”。

159 views 0:06 / 0:14

Four tweets by @jingrunhe criticizing the US, defending China's "wolf warrior" diplomacy, rejecting Canada's concerns over Xinjiang, and celebrating the arrest of Hong Kong's pro-democracy leaders.

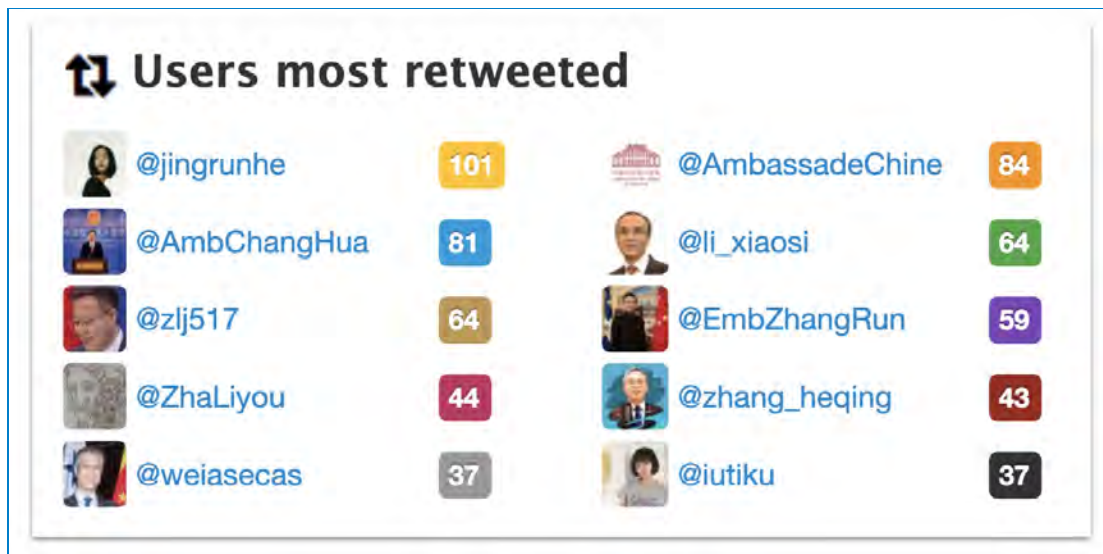


English tweets by @jingrunhe promoting or defending China.



English tweets by @jingrunhe on Xinjiang, left, and Australia, right.

The account appeared particularly keen to promote Chinese officials. A list of the accounts it most retweeted reads like a Who's Who of Chinese online diplomacy.



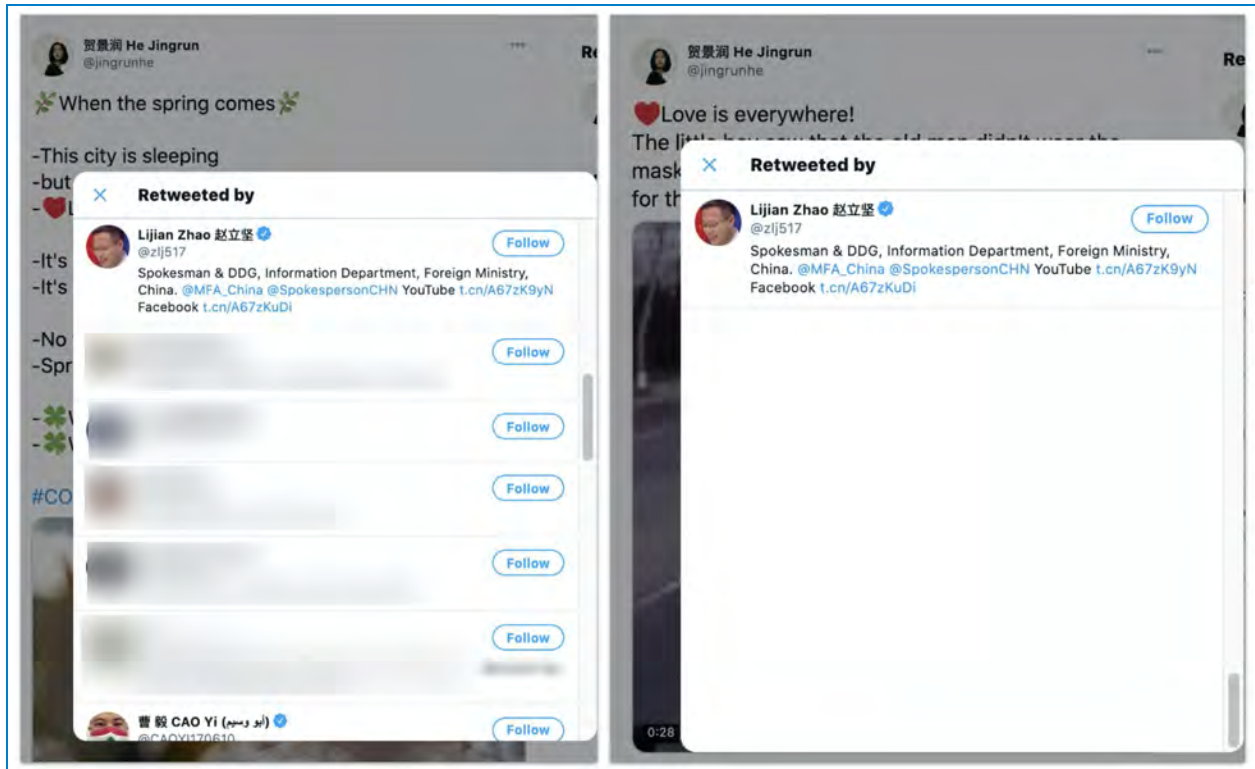
Twitonomy scan of accounts most retweeted by He Jingrun. The left-hand column includes China's [Ambassador to Iran](#), Foreign Ministry Deputy Spokesman [Lijian Zhao](#), the Chinese [Consul in Kolkata](#) and the Chinese [Ambassador in Panama](#). The right-hand column includes China's [Embassy in France](#), [Ambassador to Austria](#), [Ambassador to the Dominican Republic](#), and the Cultural Counsellor at the [Chinese Embassy in Pakistan](#).

The account also tried to engage with Western celebrities and leaders, including Taylor Swift and Donald Trump, by replying to their tweets with content that was generally pro-Swift and anti-Trump.



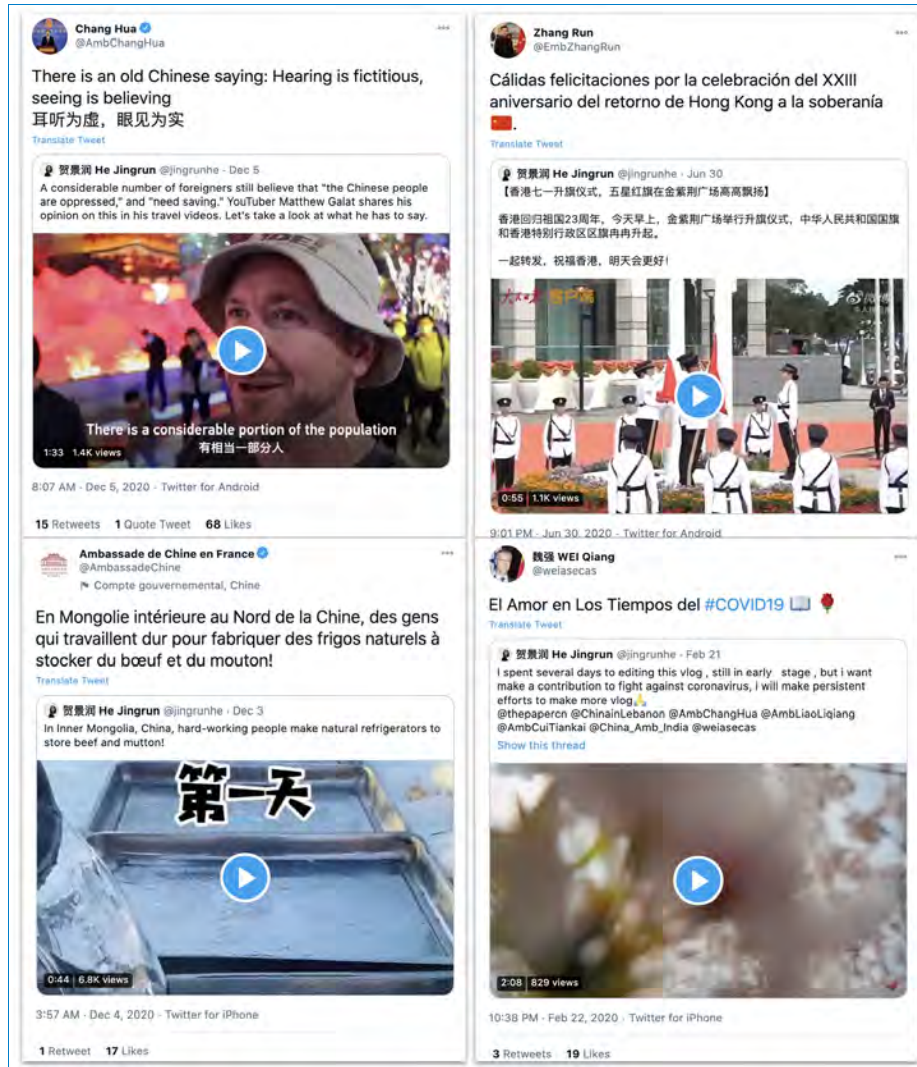
Left, He Jingrun replying to Donald Trump. Center, praising Taylor Swift. Right, trolling Trump with a dubbed version of the film ["The Queen's Corgi."](#)

Neither Swift nor Trump engaged with He Jingrun, but many of the Chinese diplomatic accounts did. As early as February, the Chinese Foreign Ministry’s Deputy Spokesman Lijian Zhao, one of the best known of China’s “wolf warriors,” retweeted her; he was to do so five times in the next three months.



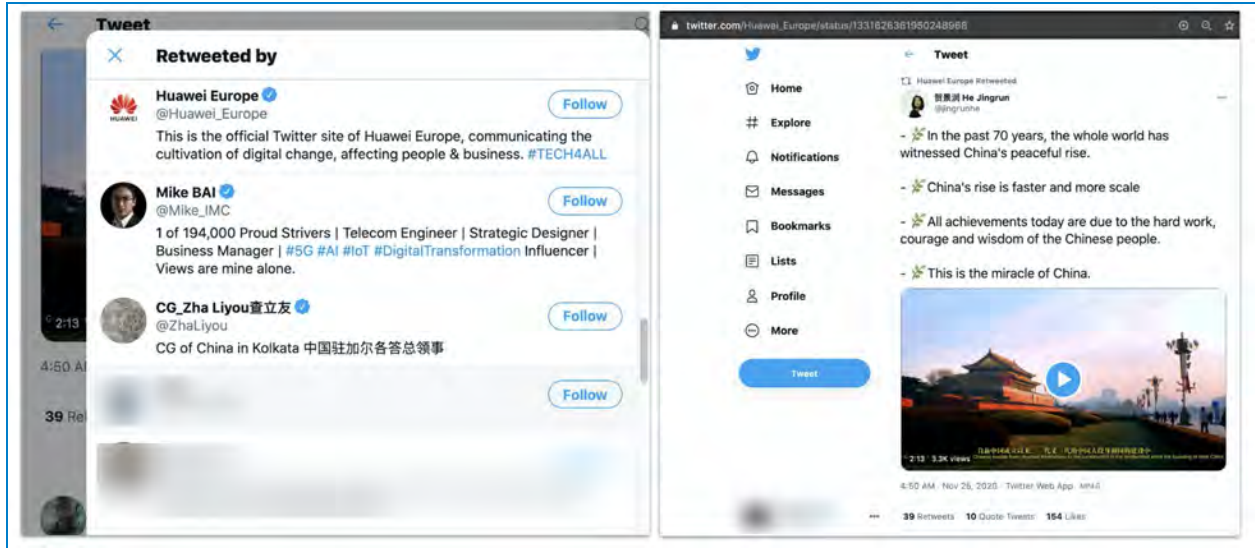
Lijian Zhao retweeting He Jingrun, [February 21](#) (left) and [March 3](#) (right). We have blurred out unaffiliated users. The bottom left account, @CAOYI170610, is that of the Chinese Consul in Lebanon. Note that on the right-hand post, Lijian Zhao appears to have been the first retweeter.

According to a scan with Meltwater, China’s ambassador to Iran retweeted He Jingrun 25 times and quote tweeted her eight times; China’s ambassador to the Dominican Republic retweeted her 15 times and quoted her nine times; the Chinese Embassy in France retweeted her 18 times and quote-tweeted her nine times; and the ambassador to Panama retweeted her nine times and quote-tweeted her 15 times.



Tweets by He Jingrun being quoted by Chinese officials. Clockwise from the top left, the [ambassador to Iran](#), the [ambassador to the Dominican Republic](#), the [ambassador to Panama](#) and the [embassy to France](#).

This was not the account's only celebrity amplification. On one occasion, when it shared the Spamouflage video headlined "China's development, the journey of the times," He Jingrun was retweeted by the verified Twitter account of Huawei Europe, with over five million followers. The same tweet was also shared by Huawei Europe senior executive Mike Bai, with over 800,000 followers; according to Meltwater, Bai retweeted He Jingrun 55 times between August 16 and December 13. It is important to note that there is no indication these amplifiers were aware they were retweeting a fake account with a stolen profile picture; these retweets are important because they show that Spamouflage was, at last, breaking out of its echo chamber.



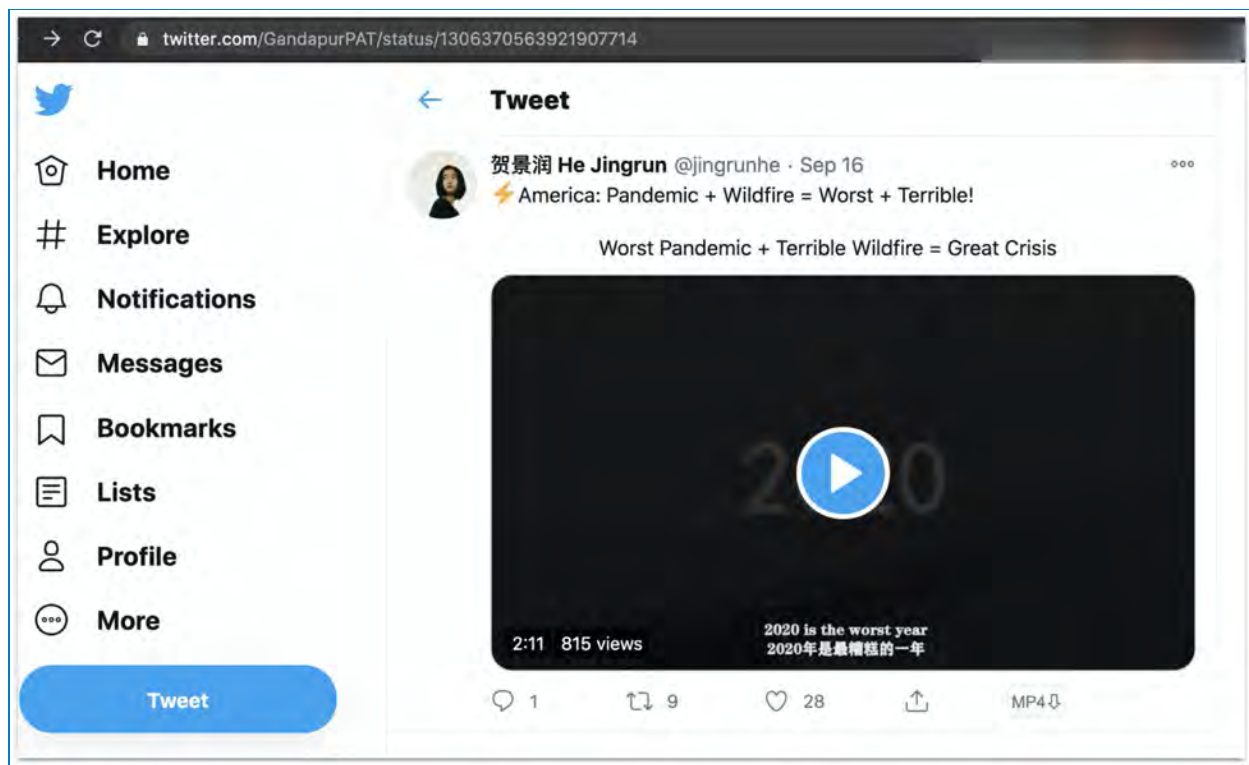
Left, amplification of a tweet by He Jingrun, including Huawei Europe, Mike Bai and the Chinese Consul in Kolkata. Right, the original tweet, showing the URL of the Huawei retweet; this is the Spamuflage video “China’s development, the journey of the times.”

Sometimes, this diplomatic amplification drew He Jingrun to the attention of new audiences. On March 22, He Jingrun [tweeted](#) a video of a parade for COVID-19 medics in an unnamed Chinese city (the video was also shared by state outlet [People’s Video](#)). The following day, China’s Ambassador to Panama, Wei Qiang, [quote-tweeted](#) her, identifying the location as Xianning, in Hubei Province. Roughly ten hours later, Panama news channel TVN Noticias (@tvnnoticias) [posted the same video](#) to its 866,000 followers, with a text almost identical to that posted by the ambassador, and tagged both the ambassador and He Jingrun.



Transmission: left, He Jingrun’s tweet. Center, quote tweeted by the ambassador. Right, both the ambassador and He Jingrun quoted by TVN Noticias.

Chinese diplomats were not the only amplifiers. It was retweeted by, among others, Chilean politician [Hugo Gutiérrez](#) (126,000 followers, four retweets), Panamanian TV personality [Annette Quinn](#) (109,000 followers, two retweets) and philosopher [Fernando Buen Abad](#) (108,000 followers, 13 retweets). It was also retweeted 37 times by Pakistani politician [Khurram Nawaz Gandapur](#) (91,000 followers).



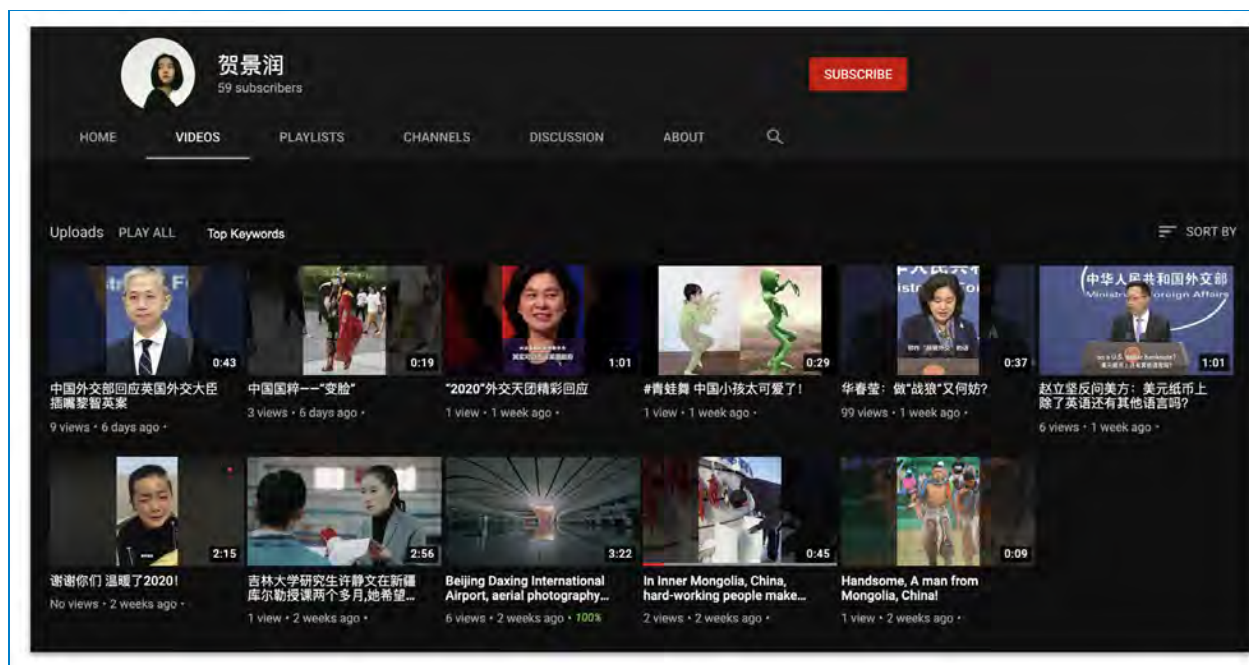
Khurram Nawaz Gandapur retweeting He Jingrun (note his handle in the URL).



Left to right, He Jingrun retweeted by Annette Quinn, quoted by Hugo Gutierrez (the tweet includes a Spamouflage video), and in conversation with Fernando Buen Abad.

These were significant influencers with large followings; some of them amplified Spamouflage's own political videos. On a few occasions, He Jingrun's tweets were also quoted in online news outlets. A [Greek defense publication](#) embedded a tweet about two U.S. drones crashing in Syria. An [Indian outlet](#) embedded a tweet about lightning strikes in the United States. A website about [cars](#) even embedded one of her posts. This does not, on its own, qualify Spamouflage as a viral success, but it is a clear mark of breakout into multiple communities.

Unusually, on December 8, the He Jingrun persona created a [YouTube channel](#) with the same profile picture and bio. It linked to the Twitter account, but none of its videos had the hallmarks of Spamouflage production. This is one of few occasions when we have seen a Spamouflage persona attempt a cross-platform identity. By December 22, however, the channel had only had 128 views.



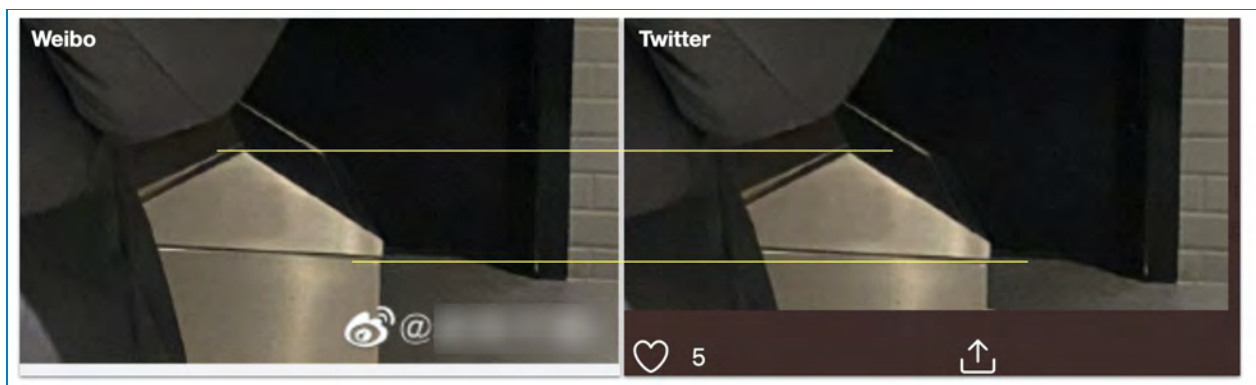
He Jingrun on YouTube, December 22.

In early January, Twitter and YouTube suspended these accounts. Three weeks later, a new Twitter account emerged in the same name, with the handle @jingrun_china. The account creation date indicates October 24, 2011, but its first tweet was on January 16, 2021. When @jingrun_china started tweeting, the user posted screenshots for others to know she was the original He Jingrun and described what had happened. The user alleged that multiple requests for restoration had been rejected. The account had a different profile picture and posted a number of “personal” shots: these appear to have been taken from the profile of a Weibo user at Shenyang City University.



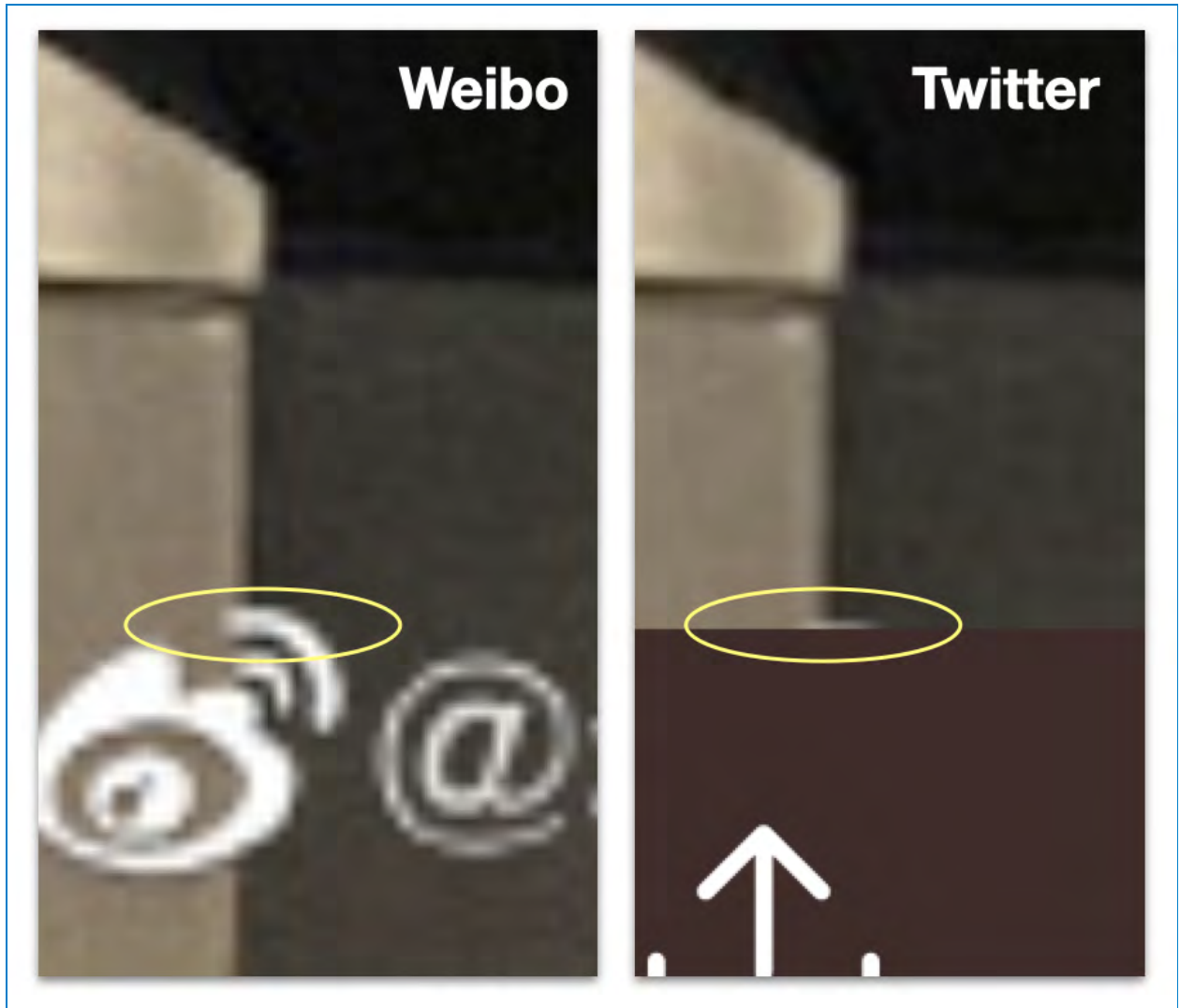
Left, the original post on Weibo, January 21, 2021. Right, He Jingrun’s tweet of “personal” photos, January 25. We have obscured the face of the original poster, as there is no indication that they had any connection to Spamoouflage. Note the characteristic Weibo thumbs in the yellow boxes on the Twitter photo.

The photos on Twitter were cropped short so that Weibo’s typical branding was not visible in the bottom right of the shot, but some of them still showed a thumb in the top right corner, a feature of Weibo that allows users who are logged in to like a picture instantly, confirming their ultimate origin.



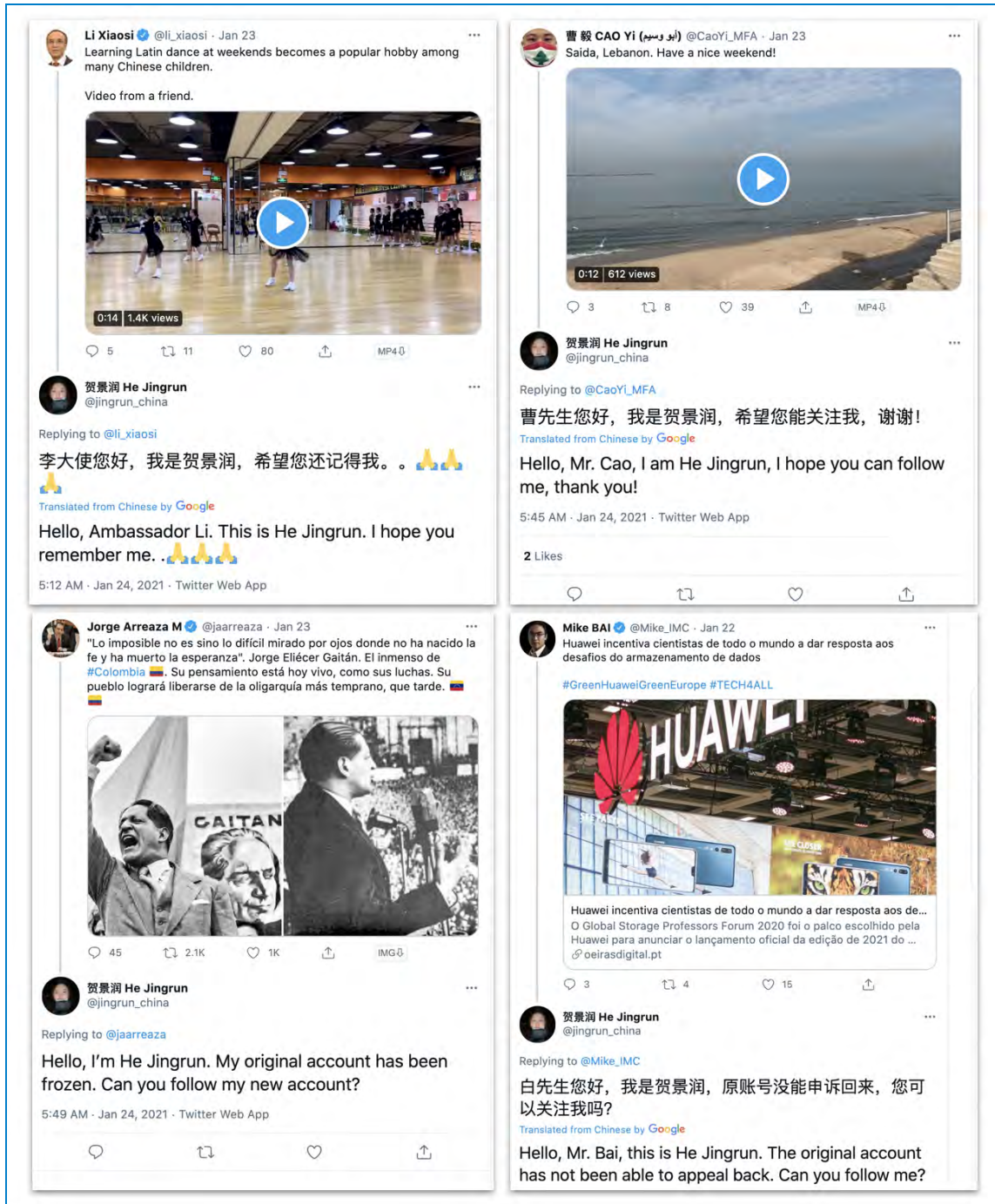
Detail of the same photo on Weibo (left) and Twitter (right), with lines to confirm that the scale is the same in both shots: note how the Twitter photo is cropped to leave out the Weibo branding.

This cropping was imperfectly done: one photo on Twitter had been cropped slightly too short, and showed a lighter curve at the very edge of the shot, corresponding to the top of the Weibo logo.



Detail from Weibo and Twitter, with the lighter curve at the very bottom of the Twitter version circled.

Graphika discovered the new account on January 25, the day after it uploaded its new profile picture and began systematic tweeting. At this stage, its primary concern appears to have been to reach out to high-profile Twitter users, including the Venezuelan Foreign Minister, a senior Huawei executive in Western Europe, Huawei Europe's own verified Twitter account, and a number of Chinese diplomats - asking for follows back from as many of them as possible.

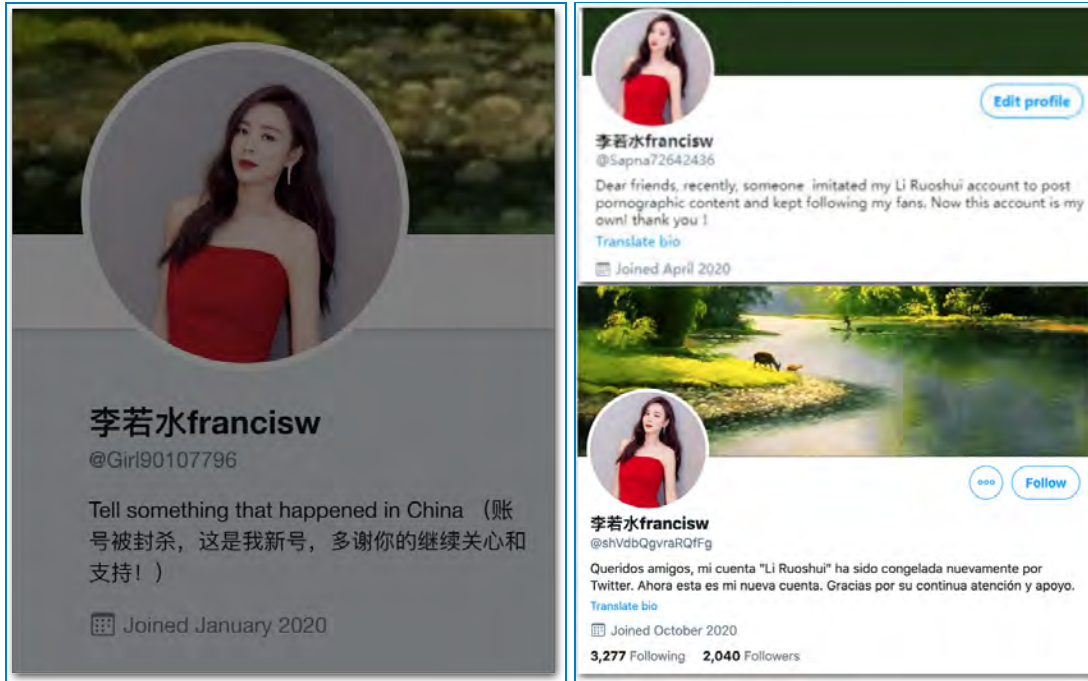


Clockwise from the top left, He Jingrun’s new account tweeting to the Chinese Ambassador to Austria, the Chinese Consul in Lebanon, Huawei executive Mike Bai, and the Venezuelan Foreign Minister.

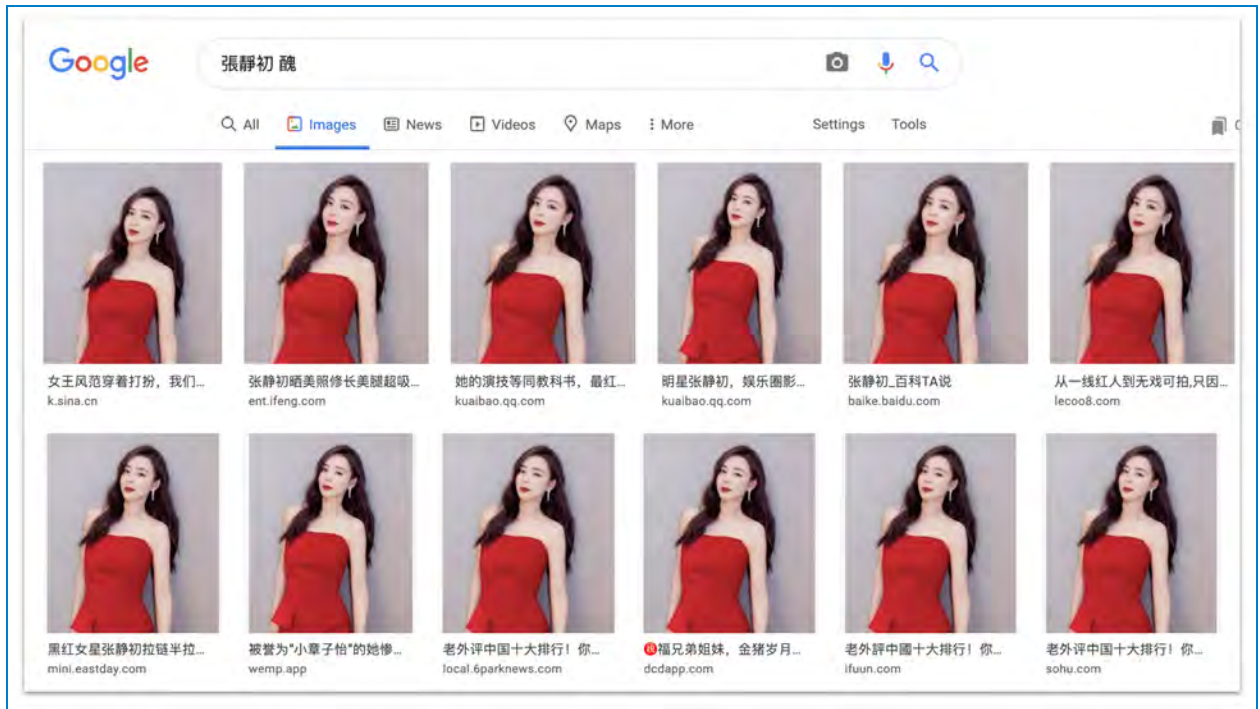
At least two Chinese diplomats whom the account approached - the Ambassador to Austria and the Consul in Lebanon - retweeted the persona’s “I’m back” tweet, indicating that this persona-based outreach was having some effect. By January 26, however, the account had only been mentioned 39 times by 35 users, showing that its audience-building efforts still had some way to go.

李若水francisw

A second important Spamuouflage persona was “[李若水francisw](#)” (Li Ruoshui hereafter, for its Chinese name), which tweeted in English, Chinese and Spanish. Unusually for Spamuouflage, seven different Twitter accounts in succession used the identical name and profile picture, which was taken from Chinese actress [Zhang Jingchu](#). The later accounts explicitly [mentioned](#) in their Twitter bios that they were created to resurrect the Li Ruoshui persona after suspension.

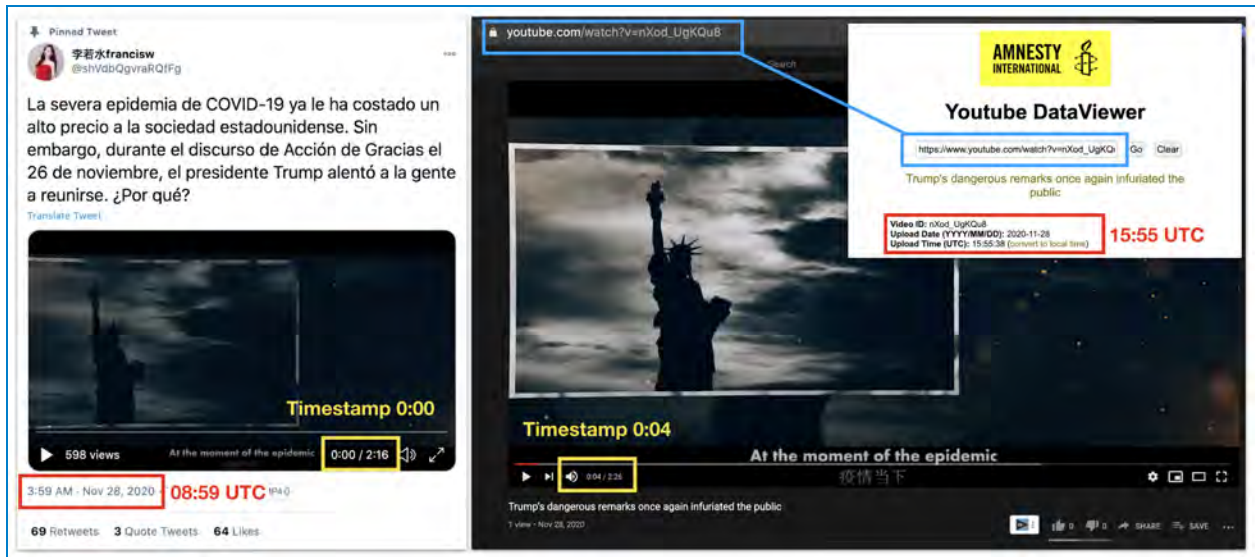


Left, profile of [@Girl90107796](#), the first account in the series, created in January 2020 and now suspended. Upper right, profile of [@Sapna72642436](#) created in April 2020. Bottom right, profile of [@shVdbQgvraROfEg](#), the third account, created in October 2020. The bottom right bio reads, “Dear friends, my account ‘Li Ruoshui’ was recently frozen by Twitter. This is my new account now. Thank you for your continued attention and support.” Twitter took down the third account in December 2020, while this report was being drafted; a [fourth](#) incarnation appeared the next day. Three more were created after successive takedowns in January 2021.

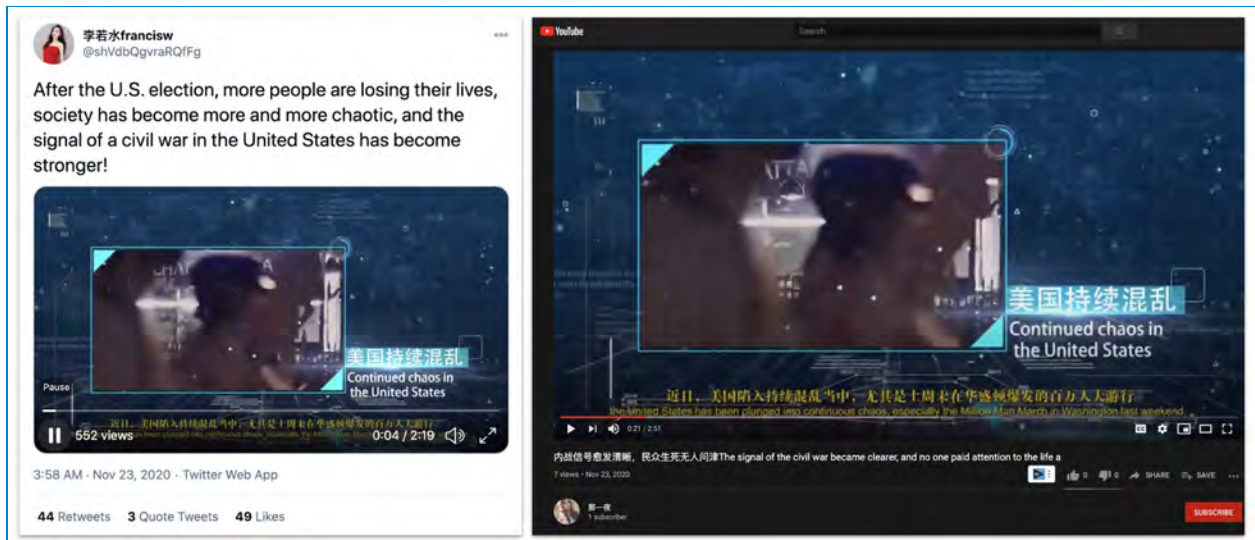


Results of a reverse [Google search](#) for Li Ruoshui's profile picture, showing Zhang Jingchu.

Spamouflage observed the third account (October-December) throughout its lifespan to understand its behavior. It retweeted and engaged with a wide variety of official and diplomatic accounts, especially from China and Venezuela. In between these retweets and replies, it posted bilingual videos in English and Chinese that also appeared on more typical Spamouflage assets. Like He Jingrun, Li Ruoshui typically tweeted versions of the Spamouflage videos that lacked the title, but Graphika was able to trace many of them back to the network. Li Ruoshui was often the first account to post these videos.



Left, tweet by Li Ruoshui on November 28 of a Spamoouflage video. The first four seconds, which included the headline, are missing. Right, YouTube video by a now-suspended account called 雾散尽 (“the fog clears”) of the video headlined “Trump’s dangerous remarks once again infuriated the public,” with the first four seconds intact. Li Ruoshui’s tweet came almost seven hours before the YouTube clip. Note the time and date of the tweet and, thanks to the [Amnesty International YouTube DataViewer](#), of the video. Note also that the Li Ruoshui video starts with a shot of the Statue of Liberty, whereas on the YouTube version this shot comes four seconds in, after the headline.



Left, tweet by Li Ruoshui of an untitled video on the prospect of civil war in the United States after the presidential election. Right, the same video on a now-suspended Spamoouflage YouTube channel called 那一夜, which only posted two videos, both of them Spamoouflage productions. The YouTube version included the title sequence and was 22 seconds longer than the Li Ruoshui version.

By its third incarnation, the account was primarily Spanish-language: it is the first time we have seen Spamouflage target Spanish-speaking audiences in this way. This language shift paid off: the account was retweeted by high-profile amplifiers including Venezuelan Foreign Minister [Jorge Arreaza](#) (1.7 million followers, retweeted Li Ruoshui four times before December 21); Venezuelan Culture Minister Ernesto Villegas Poljak (1 million followers, 2 retweets); the Venezuelan Ministry of Communication and Information (one retweet); and Argentinian journalist and former CNN Espanol anchor Carlos Montero (514,000 followers, one [quote tweet](#) that was further [retweeted](#) by Culture Minister Villegas Poljak).



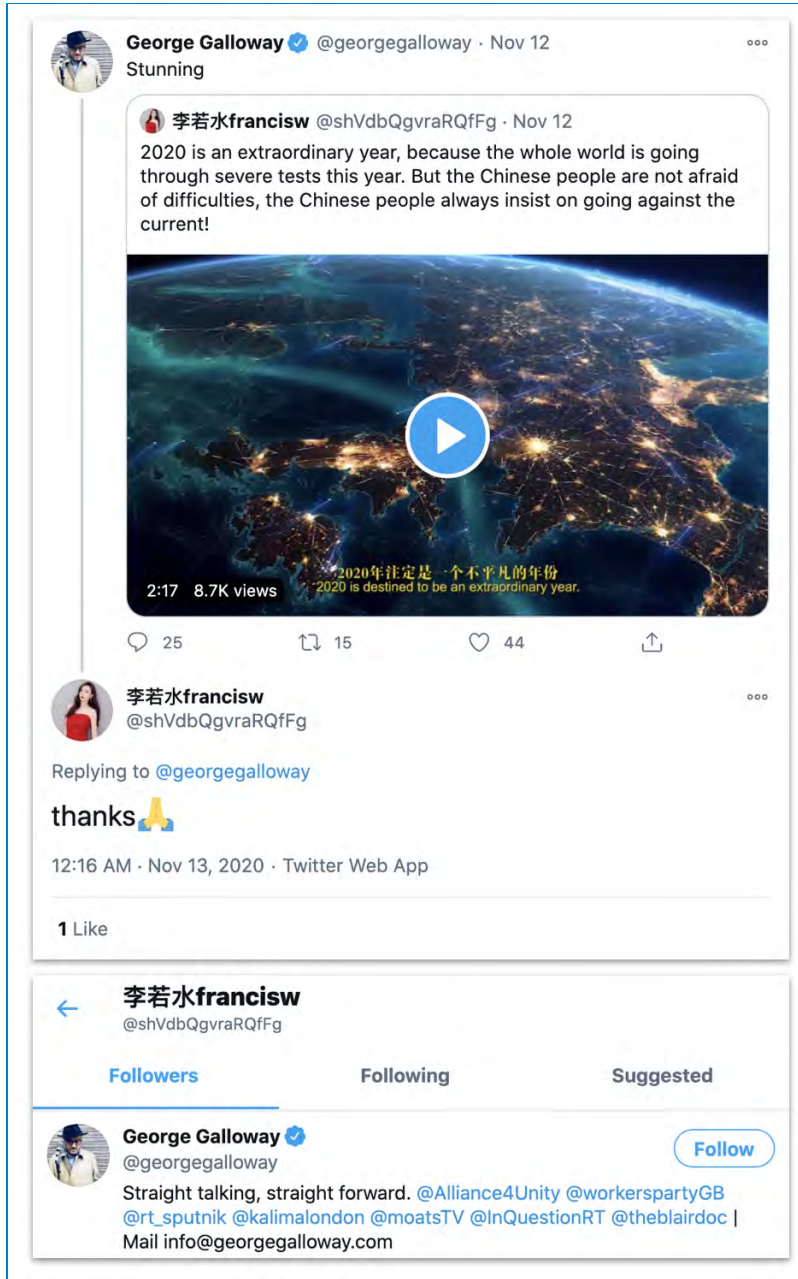
Three retweets of Li Ruoshui by Venezuelan Foreign Minister Jorge Arreaza.

These were not the only high-profile amplifiers. Li Ruoshui was also retweeted by Mike Bai, the president of strategy marketing for Western Europe at [Huawei Technologies](#) (882,000 followers, 50 retweets); Canadian comedian [Rick Cordeiro](#) (526,000 followers, one [retweet](#)); and UK political commentator George Galloway (358,000 followers, three quote tweets). A Greek [news website](#) quoted one of the account's Spamouflage video tweets in an article on EU-China relations, while a [Colombian website](#) quoted a tweet on China's recent moon mission.



Two retweets by Mike Bai of Spamouflage videos posted by Li Ruoshui.

There is no indication that any of these amplifiers suspected that this account was related to the Spamouflage operation, or even that it was fake, but their amplification gave the Li Ruoshui persona, and thus the Spamouflage operation, a significant boost.



Top, [tweet](#) by the account with Spamouflage video emphasizing “the pace of China’s all-round development” quote-tweeted by British politician and broadcaster [George Galloway](#).
Bottom, screenshot of Li Ruoshui’s followers, showing Galloway’s account.

By November 25, the account had amassed over 2,000 followers. The majority were Spanish-language accounts focused on Venezuela and left-wing politics in Latin America, but they also included Chinese governmental accounts such as [the Chinese Consulate General in Sydney](#), [Chinese Embassy in Liberia](#), the [Chinese ambassador to ASEAN](#) and the [Chinese Ambassador to Venezuela](#).



Four diplomatic assets that followed Li Ruoshui's third account. Li Baorong is the Chinese Ambassador to Venezuela.

As with He Jingrun, each time one of the Li Ruoshui accounts was taken down, the network created a new one. This shows a dedication to such false personas - who are recognized players in the community of pro-CCP influencers on Twitter - which marks a new tactic for Spamouflage.

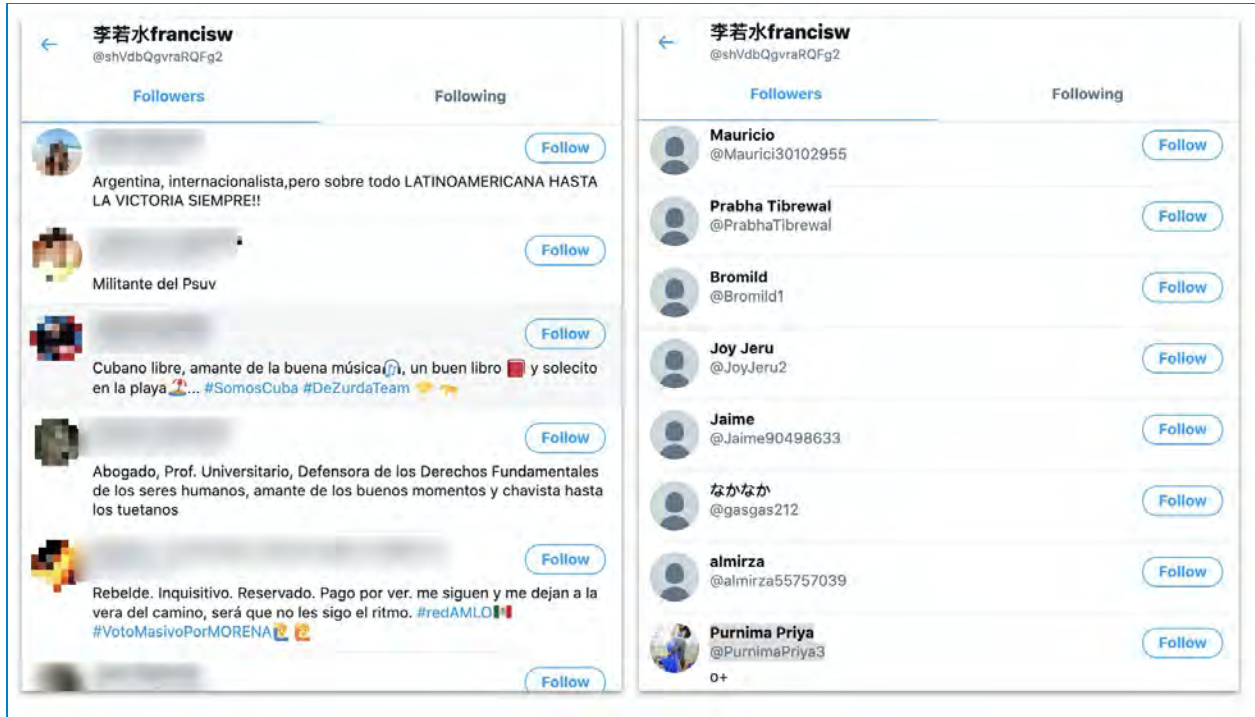
For example, Twitter took down Li Ruoshui's third incarnation on December 21. The following day, the persona began using a new account. The new account was created on October 10, 2020, but its first tweet was posted on December 21. The account tweeted 145 times in the first 48 hours, in short bursts of activity during which it posted 15-40 tweets and retweets per hour - not a sign of automation, but likely an attempt to rapidly rebuild its following.

In keeping with earlier incarnations, the account's [first tweet](#) announced its return and confirmed the link with the previous ones.



"Dear friends, my 'Li Ruoshui' account was just suspended. This is my new account. Thank you for your continued support and attention."

By the early hours of December 23, the account had 1,594 followers and was following 385. However, its followers broke down into two distinct categories. Most of its 150 most recent followers were Spanish-speaking accounts, often Venezuelan, but also Cuban, Argentinian and Spanish. Hundreds of earlier ones were spammy accounts, many of which had no profile pictures, and which largely retweeted commercial content in a range of languages including Hindi, Indonesian, Arabic, English and Spanish. It appears that the Li Ruoshui persona purchased followers to give the account the appearance of popularity before it began its outreach.



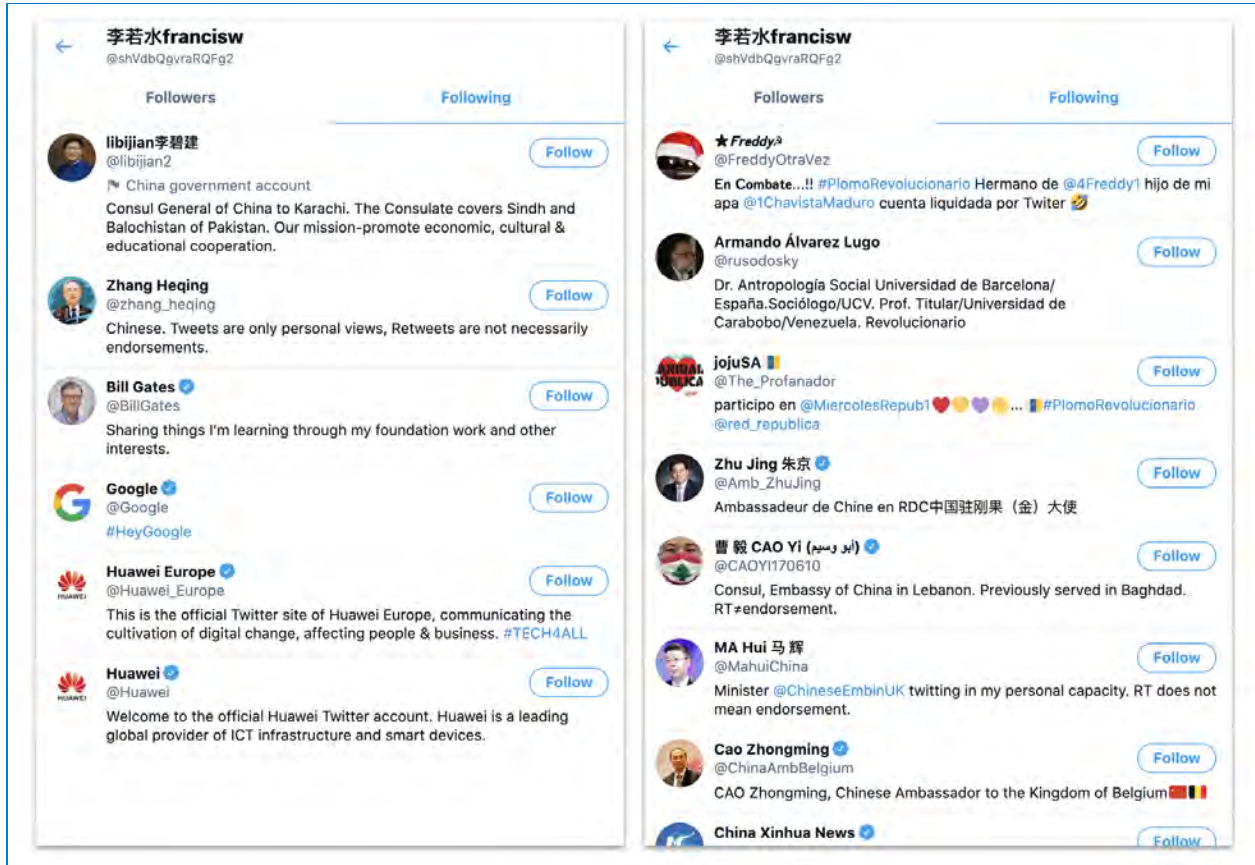
Followers of Li Ruoshui. Left, the most recent followers, showing the emphasis on Latin American accounts. Right, earlier followers.

Two of the new account's most recent followers were Chinese diplomats who had interacted with earlier incarnations: the Chinese Consul General in Karachi and the consular assistance liaison at the Chinese Embassy in Islamabad.



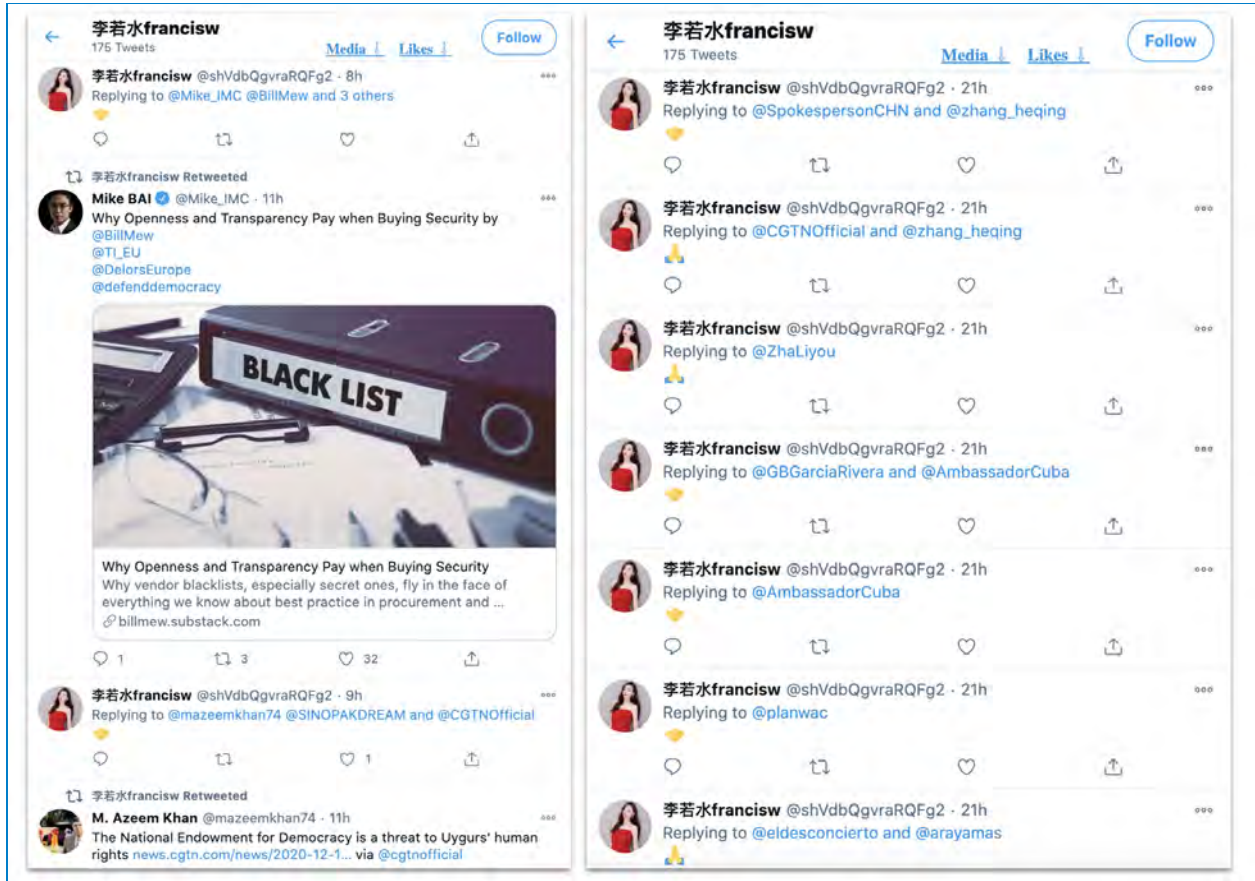
Two of the new Li Ruoshui's new followers, as of December 23, 2020.

The very first accounts that Li Ruoshui followed on this occasion were verified Huawei ones; next came Google and Bill Gates, and then two of the users who had often interacted with earlier incarnations, @zhang_heqing and @libijian2, both of whom are Chinese diplomats in Pakistan. Most of the other accounts it followed were a mixture of Spanish-language users, often self-identified as chavistas, and Chinese official ones.



Left, the first accounts followed by the new Li Ruoshui. Right, further accounts followed by Li Ruoshui, showing the mixture of official Chinese accounts and Spanish-language ones.

It typically tried to engage with other users by retweeting them, and then replying to the same tweet with an emoji. Sometimes it skipped the retweets and simply replied. Again, the accounts to which it replied included Chinese officials, Latin American commentators, and businessmen.



Left, the pattern of retweets and replies on two tweets, one from Huawei's Mike Bai, one from the consular assistance liaison at the Chinese Embassy in Pakistan, attacking the National Endowment for Democracy. Right, emoji replies without accompanying retweets.

By December 23, this strategy had earned a number of retweets from politically engaged Latin American accounts, and from a small cluster of accounts focused on China-Pakistan ties. The latter [tweet](#) was a Spamouflage video that warned of the negative impact of the U.S. COVID-19 stimulus package. As with so many of the operation's videos, its quality was not high: "printing money in disorder is constantly testing the bottom line of U.S. dollar credit, making us dollar credit [sic] reach the most vulnerable period in history," argued the automated voice-over, before reading out the latest U.S. COVID-19 death-toll as "three hundred and twenty-four zero zero zero."



Left, the Spamouflage video tweeted by Li Ruoshui. Right, retweets from Pakistan-focused accounts, of which the earliest (bottom) was the embassy consular assistance liaison.

This was not a viral rebirth, but it does show the Spamouflage network’s targeted attempt to maintain a handful of key personas and re-engage with its former audience, and at least the beginnings of success.

YouTube: Big Name, Big Following

- YouTube channels focused on Hong Kong and Taiwan shared Spamouflage content repeatedly among their other posts;
- The channels have thousands of followers and typical videos are viewed hundreds of times, marking these as another bridge to authentic audiences;
- The channels use the personas of prominent local commentators, but have some indicators that raise questions about their authenticity.

Spamouflage's breakout on YouTube took a different form. Graphika identified at least four YouTube channels that used the personas of well-known political commentators to share a mixture of their own content and Spamouflage videos. This differed from the YouTube activity that Spamouflage has previously conducted, which featured large quantities of disposable accounts with no developed persona posting Spamouflage videos, often only once or intermittently. The four carried significant quantities of Spamouflage content, but it is unclear whether they were run directly by the network or simply collaborating with it. In either case, they brought Spamouflage's videos to thousands of new viewers, a breakout that we have not observed on YouTube before.

Two of the channels were aimed at fans of prominent mainland commentators on China-Taiwan relations and Chinese defense-related topics, while the third focused on a pro-Beijing Hong Kong political candidate who has supported punitive actions against pro-democracy activists. The fourth promoted the viewpoint of a former Hong Kong police officer known for disrupting pro-democracy events and harassment of pro-democracy activists and legislators, including Joshua Wong and Tiffany Yuen. The use of these personality channels in particular - which each boast tens of thousands of Mandarin or Cantonese-speaking followers - gives us some clue about at least part of the Spamouflage operators' target demographic.

黎建南台湾 Li Jian-nan Taiwan

黎建南台湾 (Li Jian-nan Taiwan) was one YouTube [account](#) where Spamouflage content was repeatedly found. As of December 21, its videos had been viewed over 41,000 times.

The real Li Jian-nan is a Taiwanese-born commentator on Cross-Strait issues, who supports the "unification" of Taiwan with China. He appears on a Shenzhen television station geared to viewers in Taiwan, Hong Kong, and Macau. Recently, Li [blasted](#) Taiwan's "weak army" and military preparedness, and in September he attended the annual Straits Forum in Xiamen as an [advisor](#) to the Taiwanese People First Party 親民黨, after the Kuomintang, Taiwan's main opposition party, decided [not to participate](#) for fear of domestic backlash.

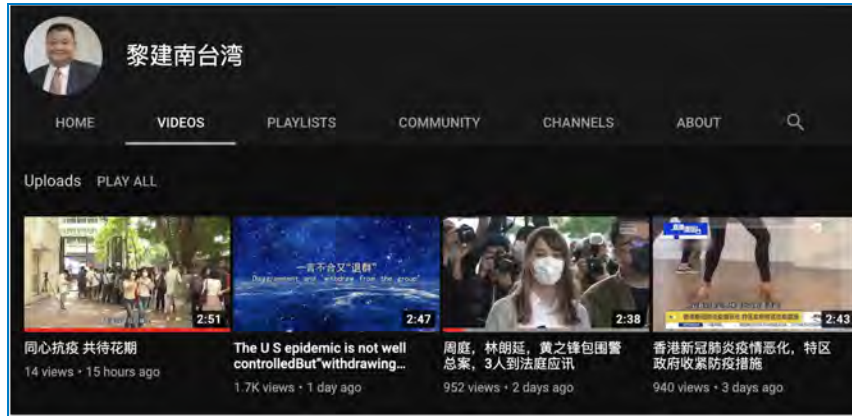
From its launch in July 2020, the YouTube channel - which calls itself an "official group channel" 官方頻道集群 - featured videos of Li Jian-nan sharing his views on current affairs. These videos

continued into the second week of November 2020, when the channel started posting daily Spamouflage videos: one each on November 9, 10 and 11 on US politics, and a double upload of the same video on Hong Kong opposition legislators on November 12 and 13. The video from November 13, a news clip that called certain Hong Kong legislators “chaos supporters” and “anti-Chinese,” attracted more than 1,700 views.



Screenshot from November 14 of the Li Jian-nan Taiwan account profile and five Spamouflage videos found posted by the account, which have since been removed.

By the fourth week of November, the above videos had all vanished from the account, reflecting a growing tendency among amplifiers of Spamouflage to periodically remove their back catalogs of videos. But a new crop of videos was now up - two of them Spamouflage productions, the other two RTHK news clips on Hong Kong politics. Again, one of the Spamouflage videos, headlined “The U S epidemic is not well controlled But ‘withdrawing from the group’ is very positive 美国疫情控制不好,” obtained more than 1,700 individual views.



Screenshot of two Spamouflage and two Hong Kong news clips on the week of November 22, 2020, after a long period when only videos of Professor Li himself had been uploaded.

By December 21, 2020, all the channel's recent videos had again been removed by the account holder: instead it showed a series of videos posted up to October 20, then a gap until December 15, and then four Spamouflage videos. The two most recent had over 800 views each.

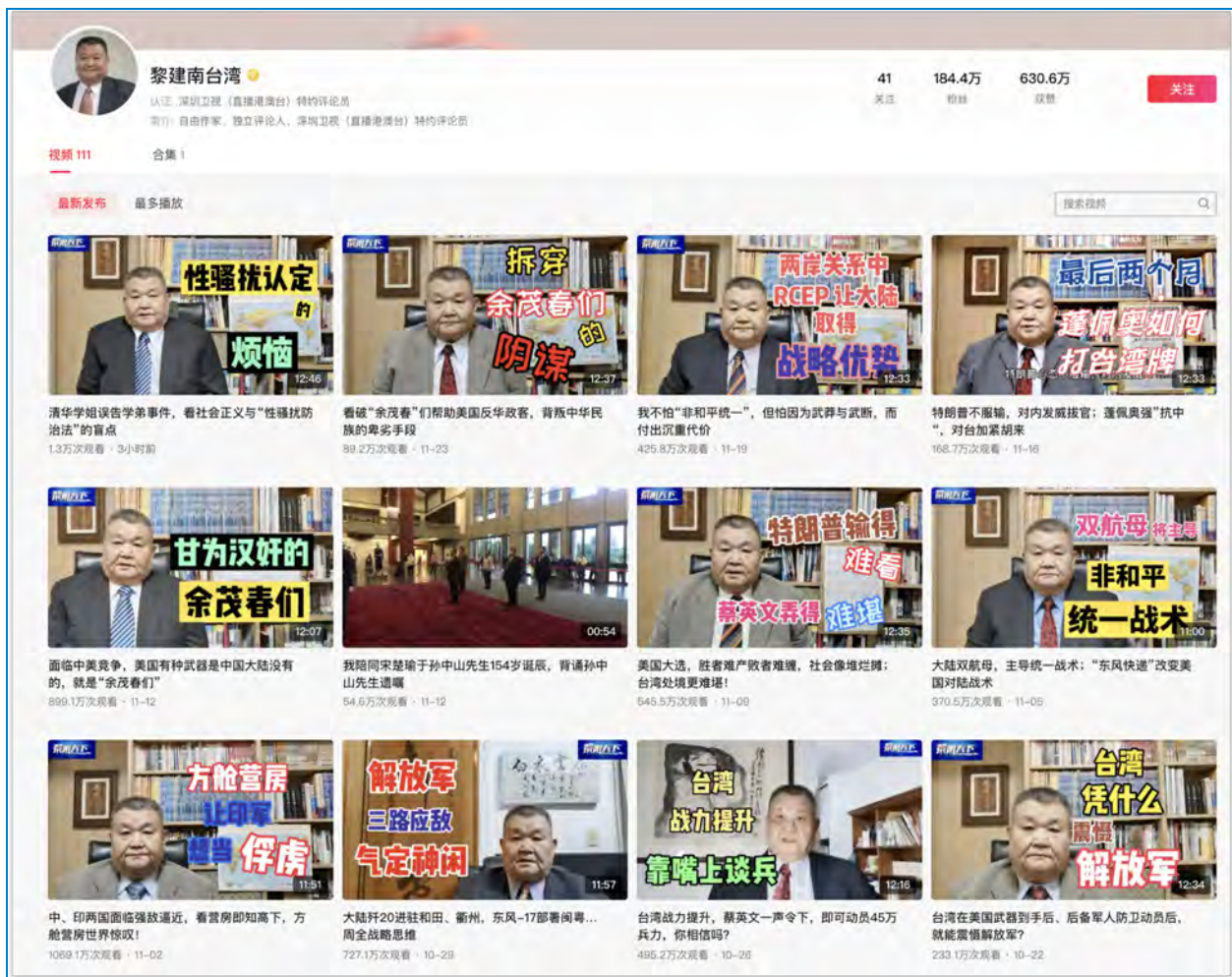


Screenshot of the Li Jian-nan channel, December 21, showing the dates of its most recent posts.

These viewing figures are still small compared with the massive numbers that a truly viral video can command, but they are orders of magnitude more than earlier iterations of Spamouflage achieved. The association with Professor Li gave Spamouflage a foothold in a new audience.

Two features about this channel raised questions over its authenticity. First, there was a clear disconnect between which videos were uploaded onto Li Jian-nan's verified fan page on [Xigua Shipin](#) - where he has more than 1.8 million fans - and onto this self-described "official channel" on

YouTube. On Xigua Shipin, Professor Li posted 12 new videos from late October to late November 2020. None of these appeared on the YouTube channel.



Screenshot of 12 latest videos posted by the real Li Jian-nan on Xigua Shipin as of November 26, 2020. None of these were aired on the "official channel" on YouTube.

The second feature was the YouTube channel's email address. According to its "About" section, the address began "zhangzhaozhong169." This is obviously not the name of Li Jian-nan, but it is, coincidentally - or perhaps not coincidentally - the name of the next YouTube channel that amplified Spamouflage.



"About" section of the Li Jian-nan channel, showing its email address.

局座张召忠 Zhang Zhaozhong

This was the [channel](#) called 局座张召忠 (Bureau Seat Zhang Zhaozhong). The real Zhang is a former PLA navy rear admiral best known as a military affairs analyst on Chinese television, who speaks on defense issues of the day, and who has reportedly developed a celebrity [following](#) in China. The YouTube channel - which, like Li Jian-nan Taiwan, advertised itself as "official" - boasted more than 14,000 subscribers.



Screenshot of Bureau Seat Zhang Zhaozhong profile page.

Though the account was created in March 2008, its video history suggests that it only became active in May 2020. From that time until late September 2020, the account exclusively posted talks by commentator Zhang, on topics ranging from missile defense to 5G technology.



Screenshot of earliest videos uploaded by the Zhang Zhaozhong [channel](#) in May 2020.

But from late October 2020, content of a very different sort was uploaded, including repeated instances of Spamouflage videos with both English and Chinese titles. These typically received around 1,000 views, with one video receiving over 2,000 (for comparison, some of its earlier posts featuring the read-admiral himself had tens of thousands of views).



Screenshot of the most recent videos uploaded in mid to late November 2020 by the Zhang Zhaozhong account, which are all either Spamouflage videos or news clips about Hong Kong.

As with Li Jian-nan, some factors raise questions over this channel's authenticity. It was created on March 1, 2008, but only appears to have uploaded its first video on May 17, 2020. Under "Details," the account owner lists a QQ email address that leads to a medium-sized company in the tourism industry in Lijiang, Yunnan, China. Its vanity URL reads "Cat54a," suggesting it may have applied to a different persona. Its "Description" section contains URLs of YouTube channels attributed to two other prominent Chinese military affairs specialists, which were recently taken down by the platform.



Screenshot of Zhang Zhaozhong profile, listing two similar channels of military affairs experts, recently taken down.

陳志豪資訊台 Victor Chan Information Channel

The third instance of a personality [channel](#) that promoted Spamouflage content involved one called 陳志豪資訊台, which promotes the viewpoint of a Hong Kong political figure by the name of Victor Chan (Chan Chi Ho).

The real Chan is a community [official](#) of the New People's Party 新民黨, a conservative pro-Beijing political party in Hong Kong; he [also](#) serves as vice chairman of the Hong Kong Association of Youth Commentators 香港青年時事評論員協會. A rising figure in the NPP, Chan has announced he will challenge fellow party member Eunice Yung 容海恩 in an upcoming primary [election](#) for the Legislative Council seat for New Territories East. The NPP has spoken out forcefully against the latest democracy protests, and Chan has publicly [called for](#) Hong Kong police to arrest and charge democracy activists for alleged "secessionist" activities.

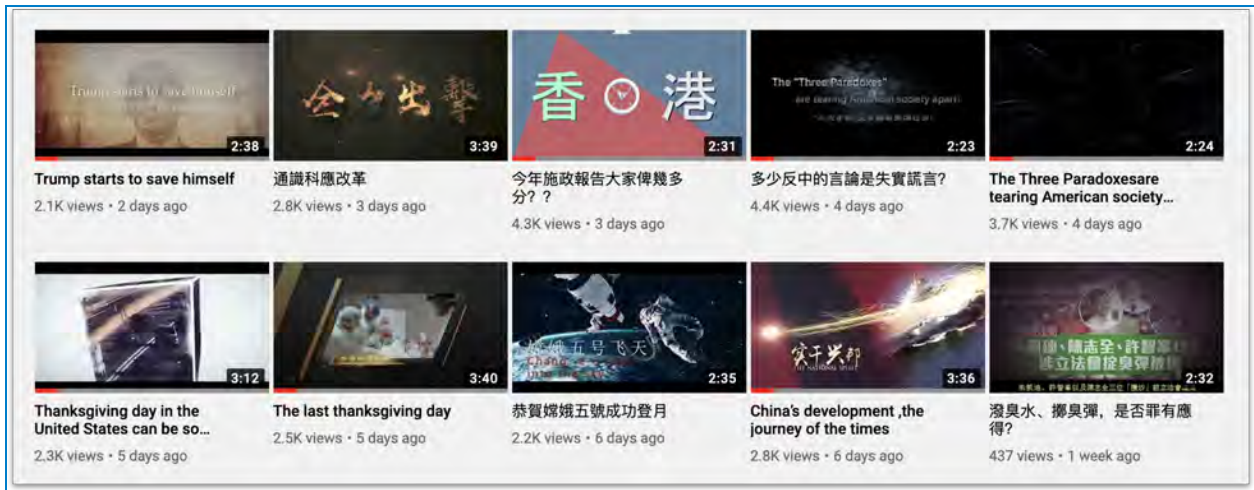


Screenshot of Victor Chan Information Channel on [YouTube](#), showing more than 28,000 subscribers and more than 1.6 million views to date.

The Chan channel on YouTube has more than 28,000 subscribers and was originally launched in February 2012. Three phases can be identified in its output over the past year: between April and August 2020, it posted original content of Chan in the same self-recorded style as the above examples. In the second phase, Chan's channel reposted non-original news or video clips of pro-Beijing, anti-U.S., and pro-Hong Kong establishment themes. From the third week of November, it posted multiple Spamouflage videos. These videos covered issues pertaining to Hong Kong's democracy movement, China's achievements, and the decline of the U.S. (e.g., its failure in handling COVID-19 and, most recently, the [domestic chaos](#) brought by Trump supporters at Capitol Hill), which are three of the major themes we have identified across all Spamouflage productions. Interestingly, in all Spamouflage videos posted on the channel since November 25, the operator added a one-second disclaimer to the opening of these videos which said, "Video clip reposted from online media."



Screenshot of Victor Chan channel videos from first period (upper row) and second period (lower row), devoid of Spamouflage content.



Screenshot of uploads by the Victor Chan channel at the end of November, with three confirmed to have circulated within the Spamouflage network.



Screenshots of two Spamouflage videos posted on Chan's YouTube channel 陳志豪資訊台. Both videos - one the same video praising [China's achievements](#) and one [framing anti-China comments in Hong Kong as lies](#) - include a one-second disclaimer at the beginning of the videos stating that the clip was "reposted from online sources."

Despite the obvious switch from Chan-originated content to non-original videos, view counts show that recent clips obtained a significant amount of engagement: on average, the past ten videos were each viewed an average of 2,800 times. The channel's latest video as of December 1, titled "[Counterattack of reciprocity. National sovereignty does not allow other countries to intervene](#)" criticizing the U.S. 's intervention in Hong Kong issues, attracted over 2,600 views in less than eight hours.

Whether this channel is actually run by Chan or simply borrowing his name, it is, again, an important persona for Spamouflage, presenting its videos to a mainly Hong Kong-focused audience.

哥石房有 **Brother Shek Fong Yau**

The fourth video [channel](#) for fans of a known influencer that pushed out Spamouflage videos was one called "Man 哥石房有 雷霆戰虎 以一敵百" (Man Brother Shek Fong Yau - Thunder Tiger - One Man Against 100"). The channel boasts nearly 66,000 subscribers and its videos have racked up over 10 million views.

The real Shek Fong Yau is a former Hong Kong policeman with a history of showing up at pro-democracy rallies to lob [insults](#) at activists. A Reuters image dated July 11, 2020 shows Shek shouting only a few [inches](#) away from Joshua Wong and Tiffany Yuen Ka-wai during a primary election rally aimed at selecting democracy candidates. At an earlier event in October 2019, he was seen confronting masked protesters, telling them to pull down their masks and [reveal](#) their identities.

The Brother Shek channel was created on November 21, 2019 and features mostly clips of Shek opining on the latest issues in Hong Kong politics, always taking a pro-China view of things.

Unusually among the persona channels, this one contains scannable AliPay and WeChat Pay barcodes - allowing visitors to donate, making the page seem more authentic. Also of note, the Shek channel's owner periodically removes Spamouflage-style videos - after they accumulated hundreds or thousands of views - a tactic practiced by other channels in the network.



Screenshot of videos uploaded to Shek Fong Yau's channel between December 15 and 21, 2020. In addition to self-recorded videos, Shek appears to have shared five Spamouflage videos during this week.



Screenshot taken early January 2021 of videos on Shek Fong Yau's channel during the same week of December 15-21, 2020, indicating that Shek has removed the five Spamouflage videos.



Example of Spamuflage video posted on Shek's YouTube channel titled "[嚴格規例積極抗疫，齊心協力走出困境](#)" ("Strict regulation and proactive fight against the pandemic, in it together to get out of the dilemma"), which includes a one-second disclaimer at the beginning of the videos stating that the clip was "reposted from online sources." The square frame of the video, the style and language of the disclaimer are the same as that of Spamuflage videos on Victor Chan's channel.

Personas, Old and New

- Spamouflage adds marginally more developed personas to its roster of fake accounts;
- Some of the persona accounts appear to have taken over the accounts and identities of existing users, likely to leverage their existing audiences;
- These stolen personas included users in North and South America and Africa;
- This shows a slowly developing sophistication compared with earlier iterations of Spamouflage’s “brute force, high volume” approach.

The gradual breakout of such assets on Twitter and YouTube was underpinned by a tactical shift in the operation. Throughout the summer and autumn of 2020, the network continued churning out content from fake accounts with little attempt at personality, many of which were taken down almost as fast as they posted. In parallel, however, it appears to have begun experimenting with more personality-based accounts. Some, notably He Jingrun and Li Ruoshui, appear to have been created for the network; the YouTube channels listed above may also fall into that category. Others were likely compromised from users who abandoned them in the early part of the last decade and allocated new identities. Such compromised accounts can easily be bought online and used to give an asset a spurious air of authenticity and antiquity.

A few, however, appear to have been compromised, but kept their original personas intact and maintained their audiences, some of which were in the thousands. This may have indicated a desire to reach specific audiences by leveraging known, but dormant, personas. If so, it indicates an operation whose goals included Latin America, the United States, and Nigeria. On one occasion, the account in question was verified, a valuable addition to any operation.

@Hongkongshanji

An example of an account that was hijacked and renamed was the account called, at the time of writing, @Hongkongshanji. As of November 25, 2020, the account featured a Chinese-language bio focused on Hong Kong, and a profile picture that features on a number of Chinese sites. The account was created in September 2011, and had 6,416 followers. It largely posted Spamouflage videos with Chinese texts and English titles.

← 尖沙咀寸头仔
4,350 Tweets



尖沙咀寸头仔
@Hongkongshanji

想當年我持兩罐殺蟲劑，從銅鑼灣一路噴到尖沙咀，殺由早三天三夜眼睛都不眨。
黃尸不除，香港難安！

Translated from Chinese by Google

I think I was holding two cans of insecticide and sprayed it all the way from Causeway Bay to Tsim Sha Tsui.
If the yellow corpse is not removed, Hong Kong will be troubled!

Joined September 2011

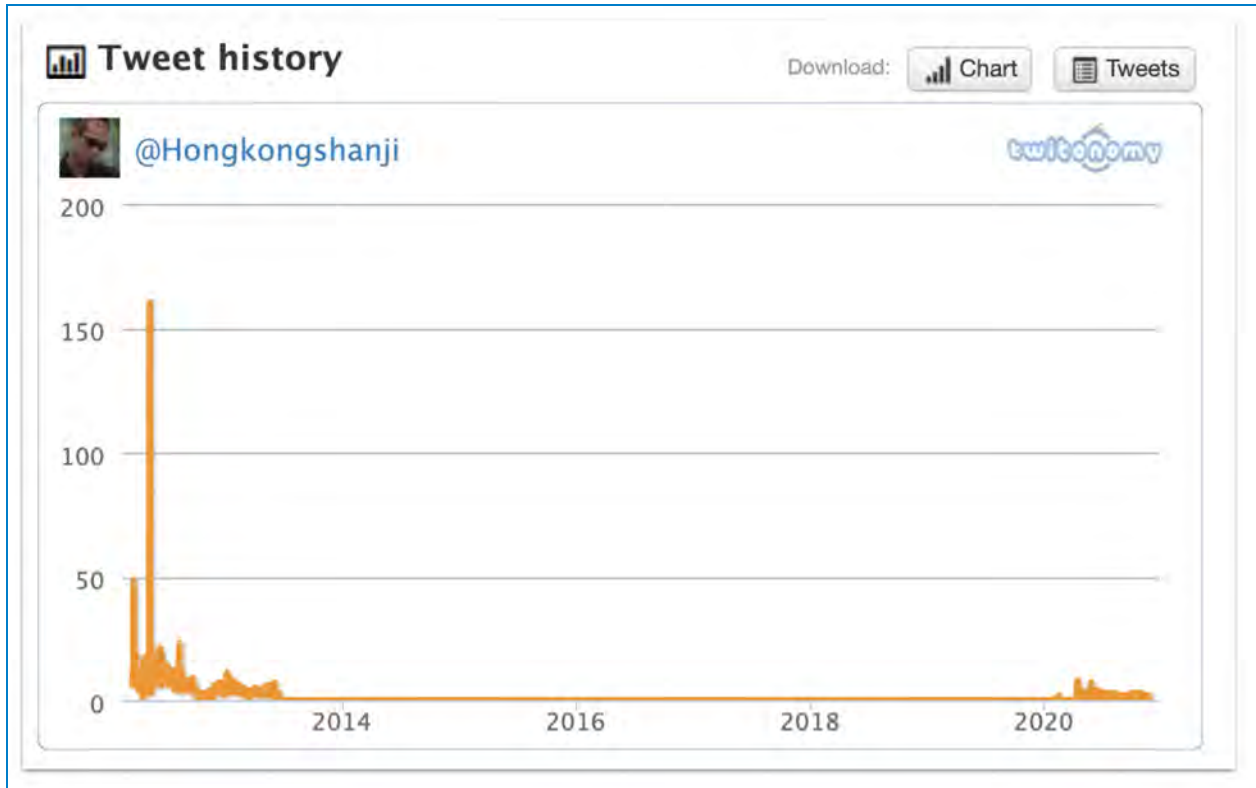
3,737 Following 6,416 Followers

Google 山雞哥



Top, profile of the account currently called @Hongkongshanji.
Bottom, results of a [reverse Google search](#) for its profile picture shows that it is a picture of Hong Kong actor Jordan Chan.

The posting history of @hongkongshanji makes clear that it was created by an authentic user in 2011, abandoned in 2013, hijacked, renamed and repurposed to post Spamouflage videos. A timeline of its posts shows the break in posting between 2013 and 2020.



@Hongkongshanji's history, 2013-2020.

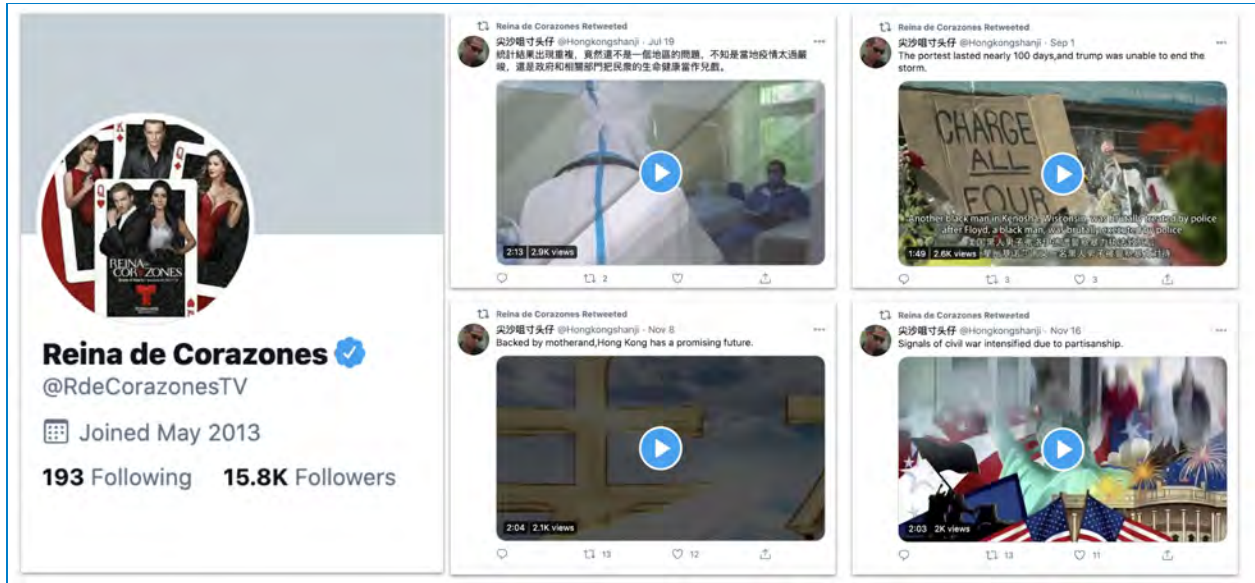
When the account resumed activity, the new operators did not delete its old tweets. These were in English and focused heavily on entrepreneurship, promoting a now-defunct website called FounderSync.com. At least one user was listed as replying to the account by using the handle @FounderSync, confirming that this was its original handle.



Retweet by @Hongkongshanji, January 2013. Note how the account @Needcofounder was listed as replying to @Hongkongshanji but its tweet text was addressed to @FounderSync, confirming the earlier name.

The Drama Queen of Hearts

Throughout the second half of 2020, @Hongkongshanji was repeatedly retweeted by a verified Spanish-language account called “[Reina de Corazones](#)” (Queen of Hearts), which had over 15,000 followers. The retweeting was systematic - 109 retweets between July 30 and November 25 - and led us to investigate the Queen of Hearts as a probable Spamuflage asset.



Left, profile of Reina de Corazones, showing the verified check mark. Right, four of the account's retweets of @Hongkongshanji between July and November, 2020.

The amplification by Reina de Corazones is noteworthy because it is a verified account, but the account's behavior raises questions. The name and imagery on the Twitter account match the brand of a telenovela that was broadcast on [Telemundo](#) in 2014.



Left, Telemundo artwork, from [IMDb](#). Right, the profile.

The account was created in 2013, but its timeline showed no posts earlier than September 2019, and no systematic activity until April 2020, when it posted “hi.”



The earliest visible tweets from @RdeCorazonesTV, 2019-20.

In April and May 2020, the account retweeted posts from verified pop stars. On May 25, almost six years after the event, it retweeted a tweet from 2014 that advertised the launch of the “Reina de Corazones” telenovela. Its next tweet was the first of 109 retweets of @Hongkongshanji it would post over the next six months.

The image shows a screenshot of a Twitter thread from the account 'Reina de Corazones' (verified, 537 tweets). The thread consists of three tweets:

- Top tweet:** Retweeted by 'Reina de Corazones' from user @Hongkongshanji on May 27. The text is in Chinese: '尖沙咀寸头仔 @Hongkongshanji · May 27 港版《#國安法》仲將有效針對極少數分裂勢力同「黑暴勢力」，起到「斬草除根」嘅效果。垂死掙扎嘅「黑暴分子」必將受到法律嚴懲，正義嘅曙光一定會照耀整個香港，「撥開雲霧見青天」嘅 #香港 一定可以重獲新生！'. Below the text is a video player showing a dark scene with the Chinese text '黑暴垂死掙扎 港警戡亂護法' (Black violence is dying and struggling, Hong Kong police quell chaos and protect the law). The video has 4.2K views and is 2:20 long.
- Middle tweet:** Retweeted by 'Reina de Corazones' from user Eugenio Siller (@eugenio_siller) on Jul 5, 2014. The text is in Spanish: 'Dos días para el estreno de @RdeCorazonesTV • "REINA DE CORAZONES" !!!!!!!!!!!!!'. Below the text is a promotional image for the telenovela 'REINA de CORAZONES' featuring a man and a woman. The text on the image says 'Gran Estreno Lunes 7 de Julio 8pm/7c'.
- Bottom tweet:** Retweeted by 'Reina de Corazones' from user Dylan O'Brien (@dylanobrien) on May 25. The text is 'Holy shit yes 🙌'. Below this is a reply from Erin Lim (@erinlimofficial) on May 25: 'Inspired by @sarahramos & @dylanobrien which was inspired by @JesseEisenberg & @andrewgarfieldl & @jtimberlake which was inspired by @finkd @sparker @esaverin'.

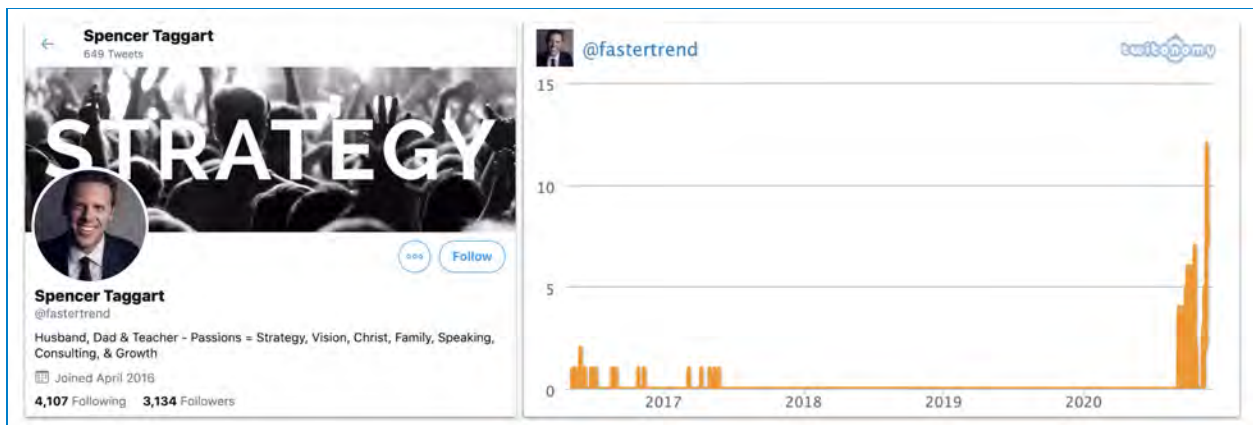
Three tweets by @RdeCorazonesTV, May 25-27, 2020. Note the tweet from 2014 in the middle.

This pattern of behavior suggests that the @RdeCorazonestv account was hijacked and repurposed, but kept its old identity to leverage its existing audience. Its profile picture and creation date correspond with the timing of the telenovela in 2014, but its tweet history only begins in 2019 and only shows significant activity from April 2020, around the time Spamouflage expanded its activity. None of its posts achieved high numbers of retweets, but this was likely another attempt by the network to penetrate an existing Latin American market by obtaining and repurposing a verified account with 15,000 followers.

Tagging Taggart

A third important Spamouflage account was called @fastertrend, screen name “Spencer Taggart.” This achieved particular engagement from Chinese official users in Pakistan, and (again) from Khurram Nawaz Gandapur, who retweeted it four times.

Like the Queen of Hearts, @fastertrend had a clearly defined identity: an American user called Spencer Taggart. The account’s bio claimed to be a “Husband, Dad & Teacher”; it was created in April 2016. Like the accounts above, however, its posting history showed a break between mid-2017 and late 2020.



Left, profile of @fastertrend. Right, Twitonomy scan of the account’s activity: note the gap between 2017 and late 2020. All tweets prior to September 2, 2020, were deleted from the account’s timeline.

This account was most likely compromised and turned to Spamouflage posting in mid-2020, either by the operation or by a third-party vendor. Its most unusual feature was that the exact same screen name, profile, background and bio appeared on another, much older, account called @SpencerTaggart, that belongs to a [businessman and marketer](#). The @SpencerTaggart account last tweeted in December 2018; its most recent posts at that stage were automated shares of promotional videos on YouTube.



Left, the genuine account of [Spencer Taggart](#), created in April 2009. Right, Spamouflage asset [@fastertrend](#), created in 2016.

@fastertrend largely posted Spamouflage videos. When it did so, it was amplified by two sorts of users. The more common amplifiers were accounts from the [Dracula botnet](#) and similar clusters: fakes with the thinnest veneer of personality, created in batches and usually suspended in batches some days or weeks later. Others, however, were Chinese officials, especially in Pakistan.



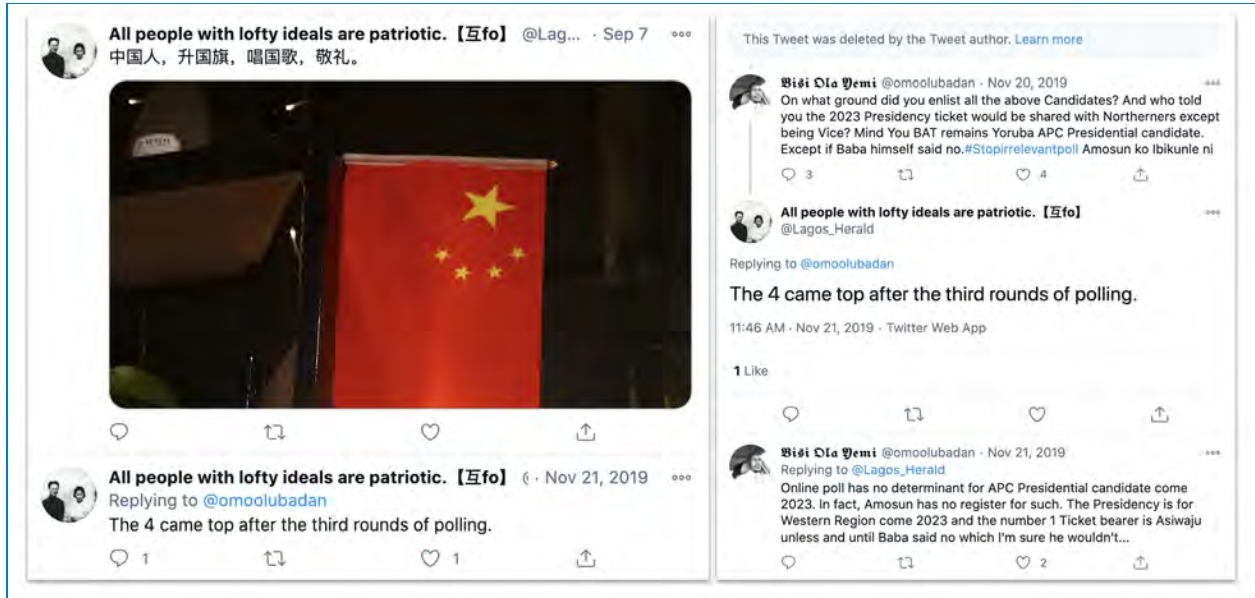
Liked and retweeted by [Gretchen Robinson](#), [April Sutton](#), [Erica Jones](#), China's [Consul General in Karachi](#), China's [consular assistance liaison](#) at the Islamabad embassy, and [Khurram Nawaz Gandapur](#).



Quote tweet by Zhang Heqing, [Cultural Counsellor](#) at the Chinese Embassy in Pakistan, of another Spamouflage [video](#) tweeted by @fastertrend.

Lagos Herald

A final amplifier of note was the one called @Lagos_Herald (screen name as of November 2020 "All people with lofty ideals are patriotic"), which was associated with the website and Facebook page of the same name. This appears to have started out in 2016 as a news site focused on the Nigerian capital, but its last Nigerian-focused posts were made in November 2019. As with the other accounts discussed here, it then fell silent for over a year before launching into Spamouflage content. As of November 2020, only one tweet from 2019 remained visible, and all previous ones had been deleted by the account holder; the one tweet concerned Nigerian politics.



Tweets by @Lagos_Herald. Left, screenshot of its timeline, showing the lone tweet from November 2019 followed by silence until September 2020. Right, detail of the 2019 conversation with an unaffiliated user; note that the first tweet from @Lagos_Herald was deleted by the author.

The use of an Nigeria-themed account without changing its identity may indicate a desire to leverage its former audience to break into Nigerian Twitter communities. However, the account's other activity suggests that any such intent was limited. The accounts it retweeted most often were @fastertrend and @libijian2, the account of the Chinese Consul in Karachi; it also amplified Chinese spokesman [Lijian Zhao](#) and the Chinese ambassador in Belgium. There is no indication that it received significant amplification from regional users.

Spamouflage from a Chinese Official Perspective

In late 2019 and early 2020 amid tension in Hong Kong, concerns about Huawei in Europe, a heated election campaign in Taiwan and deteriorating relations with the Trump administration, Twitter witnessed a surge in account creation by Chinese foreign ministry officials. Many PRC [consuls and ambassadors stationed at posts overseas](#) - as well as some notable personalities in [Beijing](#) - joined the site at this time. Though some of these representatives - "[wolf warriors](#)" - share their personal views from time to time, the majority simply 'like' and retweet content from others. Over a short period of time, this low-cost form of public diplomacy has become a regular practice for Chinese officials stationed abroad.

In August 2020 in an effort to improve site transparency, Twitter began a policy of labeling government-affiliated accounts. For China, this meant that each individual tweet by the officials themselves as well as their habitual re-tweets from authorized outlets such as Xinhua, CGTN and People's Daily would be automatically branded "China government account" or "China state-affiliated media." Beijing media complained about this "[discriminatory](#)" change that allegedly showed Twitter's "political [bias](#) against China." State personnel worried this would make their

day-to-day engagement with controversial topics on the platform less credible. In this context, Spamouflage's use of third-person cut-outs or "persona" accounts to spread pro-China content looks like a workaround to the site's intervention.

When Twitter's site integrity team labels their accounts, Chinese officials tend to make a show of it. When suspended for violations to the platform's terms of service, some officials have set up a brand new account within a day or two; in their first tweet they proclaim they were taken down but they are back, with no information on what happened.

In the exchange below, a cultural counselor at the Chinese Embassy in Islamabad, Pakistan "congratulates" the Chinese consul-general in Karachi for being "marked" by Twitter as a "China government account" after he had been sharing pro-government content for months. In response, the two men - paraphrasing [exhortations](#) by their leader - call upon "friends" of China to "tell China's story, the Chinese Communist Party's story and the Chinese peoples' story" to the world so outsiders "learn the facts." Intentionally or unintentionally, the content put out by Spamouflage assets and amplifiers respond to this appeal.



Screenshot of [conversation](#) between Chinese consul-general in Karachi, Pakistan and a cultural worker in Islamabad, on the need for others to "tell China's story" as Twitter labels state-affiliated accounts.

As illustrated above, some Chinese foreign ministry officials show a habit of both *following* and being *followed* by Spamouflage persona accounts. The persona accounts then essentially tee up Spamouflage content - free of any labels - which the Chinese officials "like" and / or retweet. In the

process, the videos receive increased attention - and accumulate hundreds or thousands of views - from people in many different countries.

The highest ranking diplomat who has shown the highest degree of engagement with Spamouflage has been Li Baorong 李宝荣, who has served as Beijing's ambassador to Venezuela since 2017. Graphika's team noticed Ambassador Li (@Li_Baorong, with some 9,300 followers as of February 2021) liking and / or retweeting Spamouflage content on a near daily basis during our monitoring in November and December 2020.



Screenshot of a double engagement (a like and a retweet) with a Spamouflage video by the Chinese ambassador to Venezuela, using his @Li_Baorong account.

In December, Li Baorong's account was taken down, and quickly replaced. A few hours after its launch, this new account was publicly greeted by the "Li Ruoshui" 李若水 account (discussed above).



Screenshots of the new [@EmbajadorChina](https://twitter.com/EmbajadorChina) account, created after two previous takedowns (top left); the ambassador's latest welcome announcements on December [4](#) and [6](#) (bottom left); and greetings from "Li Ruoshui," who [urges](#) others to follow [@EmbajadorChina](https://twitter.com/EmbajadorChina).

Li Baorong was by no means alone. Below is a sample of some PRC representatives' Twitter amplification of Spamouflage content during a single week (range: November 15-20, 2020).

| Twitter account | Times Liked Spamouflage | Times Retweeted Spamouflage |
|--|-------------------------|-----------------------------|
| Cultural counselor in Islamabad, Pakistan - Zhang Heqing 张和清 | 20 | 13 |
| Consul-General in Karachi, Pakistan - Li Bijian 李碧建 | 23 | 7 |
| Consular Assistance Liaison in Islamabad, Pakistan - M. Azeem Khan | 2 | 13 |
| Consul-General in Kolkata, India - Zha Liyou 查立友 | 5 | 2 |
| Ambassador to Bulgaria - Dong Xiaojun 董晓军 | 3 | 2 |
| Chinese Consulate in Sydney, Australia | 3 | 0 |
| Ambassador to Belgium - Cao Zhongming 曹忠明 | 0 | 1 |
| Ambassador to Austria - Li Xiaosi 李晓骥 | 1 | 0 |

Snapshot of PRC officials' engagement with Spamouflage in one week (Nov. 15-20, 2020)

Overall, Graphika estimates that officials of the Chinese government engaged with Spamouflage videos **at least 400 times per month** on Twitter in September, October and November 2020 (i.e. likes and retweets).

Content Production: Many Brands, One View

- Recent Spamouflage videos showed a variety of logos and chyrons from different media brands;
- Some of these were associated with authentic Hong Kong and Chinese news agencies;
- Others turned out to be fake entities.

In its early stage, the Spamouflage network amplified two types of videos: one type consisted of clips critical of Guo Wengui, featuring little-known media personalities who belittled Guo and read off his alleged crimes while on camera. The other, more numerous type consisted of superficial reports on current events made from stock footage, with English or Chinese voiceovers and hastily made captions on pro-China themes.

From late 2019 to early 2020, most of Spamouflage's current-events videos - which today constitute the bulk of Spamouflage content - carried no distinct markings, making it difficult to trace where they came from. But in recent months, hundreds of videos pushed out by Spamouflage assets have contained what are known in TV broadcasting as *chyrons* - graphics that occupy the lower or upper area of the screen, and carry a news story headline and a news company name.

Searches of the distinctive chyrons by name yielded some further information about some of those "news" entities. Some videos used in Spamouflage came from authentic, mainstream Hong Kong and Chinese news agencies including RTHK 香港電台 and i-CABLE News 有線寬頻, whose reports were reposted by Spamouflage when the content served its agenda. But many others turned out to be fake entities, based on Facebook pages that resembled earlier Spamouflage assets, and without any real-world record of a production company or broadcaster. Among the dubious outlets, many claimed to be local - taking names such as "Hong Kong Heat" (香港熱度) or "Dazzling Hong Kong" (璀璨香港).

These outlets seemed to share a goal of discrediting Hong Kong's democratic forces and praising Hong Kong's pro-China establishment on a daily basis.

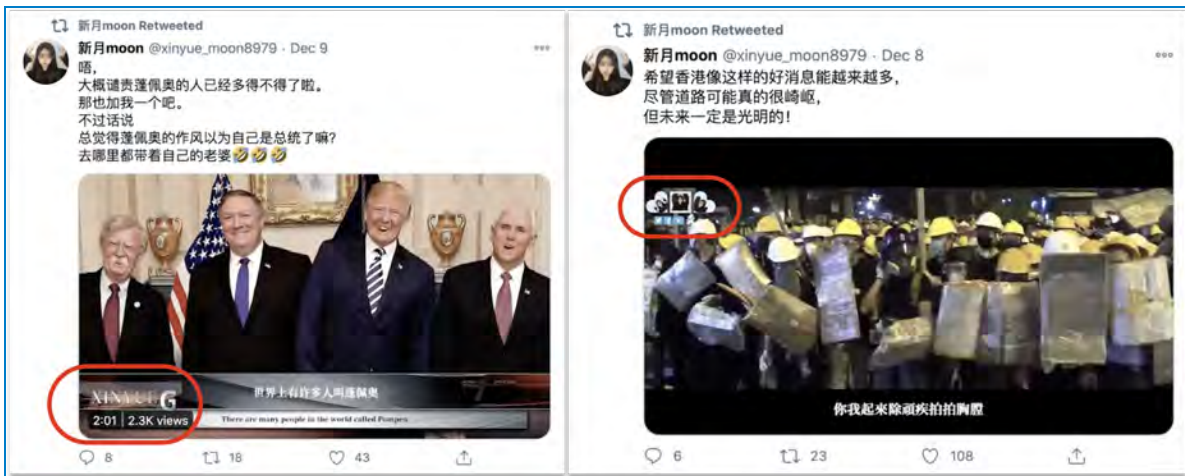
The chyrons and other branding came in a wide variety of colors, styles and forms, as illustrated below. This may indicate a supporting network of political spam outlets that Spamouflage amplified; it may indicate that Spamouflage itself was taking ever greater steps to camouflage the sheer scale of its activity by creating fictitious brands of its own. This would be another marker of growing sophistication: we hope that others will continue investigation and shine light on this specific point.



A collage of chyrons from outlets - most of which appear to be completely fake - that broadcast Chinese government viewpoints about Hong Kong on Facebook, Twitter and YouTube. Graphika came across these and others while viewing more than 1,200 videos posted by Spamouflage.

龚新月 Xinyue Gong

The first dubious news outlet noticed by Graphika was Xinyue Gong (龚新月). Accounts belonging to it were widely distributed, showing up on three separate platforms (YouTube, Facebook, and Twitter); it leveraged a fake female persona as its brand, perhaps to boost engagement with genuine accounts; and it regenerated after multiple takedowns, moving from one platform to another in order to continue making its pro-CCP views known daily.



Two videos posted on Twitter by asset @xinyue_moon8979 on December 8 and 9, showing two types of chyrons used by the same "Xinyue G" or "龚新月" production team.



Spamouflage [video](#) posted on December 1 by Twitter asset @xinyue_moon8979 that used both the left corner blue logo and the bottom red logo of "Xinyue."

Graphika found a total of seven accounts used to promote this outlet's videos: on Twitter, the effort was most recently driven by accounts [@xinyue_moon8979](#) and [@_Gxinyuemoon69](#). (A [previous account](#) was suspended earlier in 2020.) These accounts used the same person in their profile photo, an unidentified woman who appeared in their blue cover banner, which was identical to the blue chyron seen above, and whose photo is available on [various websites](#). Their self-descriptions, also identical, stressed their "patriotism" and promised to "follow back" other [pro-CCP] "deep red" accounts like theirs on Twitter.



One platform, two moons: Screenshot showing identical profile information for [@_Gxinyuemoon69](#) and [@xinyue_moon8979](#) on Twitter.

Besides high levels of engagement by both of these accounts with other Spamouflage [amplifiers on](#) Twitter, the Facebook and YouTube icons seen in Xinyue’s graphic provided new leads as well, revealing Xinyue’s cross-platform presence. On Facebook, three associated accounts were found, all of which posted Spamouflage.

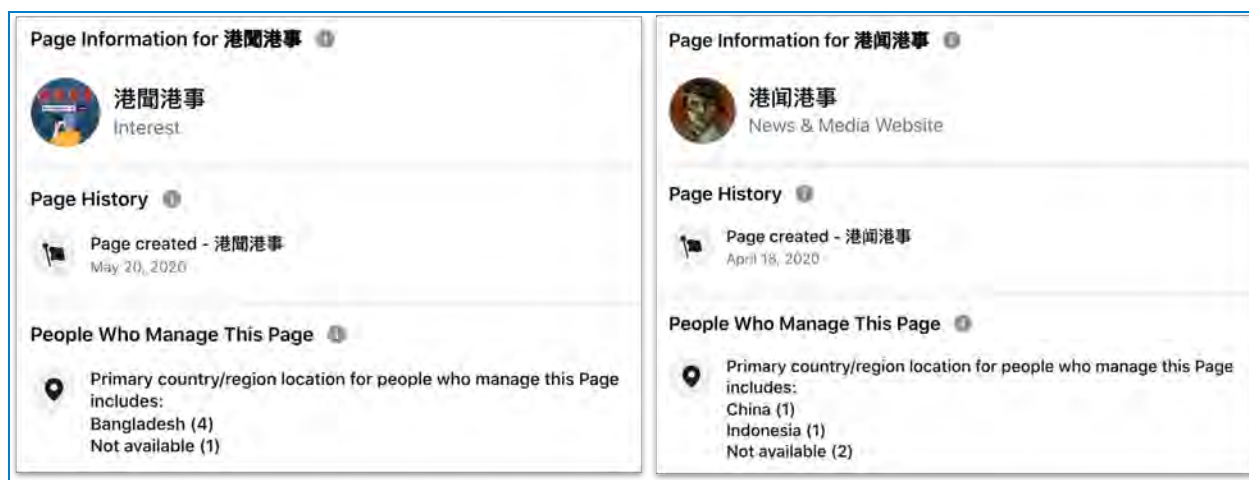


Screenshot showing [three Xinyue accounts](#) that posted Spamouflage videos in 2020. The first (on the left) states that they are from Hangzhou, China and currently live in Hong Kong. All feature the same sentence about patriotism as the Twitter accounts do.

Information on two of the Facebook pages led to two [YouTube accounts](#) as well, which have both been suspended. Interestingly, Xinyue’s latest chyron implied that she still had an active YouTube channel. But due to the takedowns, this seems no longer to be the case.

港聞港事 Real For Hong Kong

港聞港事 (Real for Hong Kong) was another brand routinely shared by Spamouflage assets. Graphika identified two accounts associated with this brand on Facebook: (1) a [Facebook page](#) (@RealForHongKong) created on May 20, 2020, four of whose admins were based in Bangladesh, a location where “like” farm operators handling Chinese accounts (including ones for [Spamouflage itself](#)) have come from, and (2) [another Facebook page](#) (@GangGangzhai) with the same name in simplified Chinese “港聞港事” created on April 18, 2020 and managed - unusually for Spamouflage - from Indonesia and China.



Page transparency for @RealForHongKong, left, and @GangGangzhai, right.

“Real for Hong Kong” claimed on its Facebook page that it assists with media production for 23 Alliance 23同盟 and Politihk Social Strategic 香港政研會, two publicly known pro-establishment and pro-China groups. While the “Real for Hong Kong” page did share content associated with Politihk Social Strategic from time to time, there was no public evidence proving the page “Real for Hong Kong” had a direct partnership with these groups. In addition to sharing videos that show its own logo, “Real for Hong Kong” also shared videos with other chyrons including THK 明日港灣, 談港論香, and MSTV HK News, all of which look like local Hong Kong outlets, but their authenticity was dubious at best: None of these outlets had freestanding websites - as a news source typically would - or registration records, and little information that would prove they were real can be gleaned from conventional searches. THK, for instance, did appear to have two Twitter accounts, but one of them has been [suspended](#). Facebook page @GangGangzhai promotes a number of Spamouflage videos including those with the chyrons of its page name (i.e., “港聞港事”) and of Xinyue Gong, which suggests a potential relationship between these accounts.



Screenshots from [@RealforHongKong](https://www.facebook.com/RealforHongKong) (港聞港事) page on Facebook.

Top left: The site claims to “record an accurate view” of Hong Kong.

Top right: Profile description says the outlet is “by your side” if you “support and love Hong Kong” and “oppose violence and lam chao,” a Cantonese expression that implies activists risk mutually-assured destruction by protesting.

Bottom: Cover photo mentions outlet is a “helper” for the pro-Beijing Politihk Social Strategic and 23 Alliance activist groups.



Screenshot showing a Spamuflage asset sharing a video titled “国安, 以正义之名” (National security, in the name of justice) with the chyron for “Real for Hong Kong”.



Screenshot showing examples of videos that “Real for Hong Kong” Facebook page uploaded. These videos have various brand markings including MSTV, THK, Real for Hong Kong, and 談港論香.

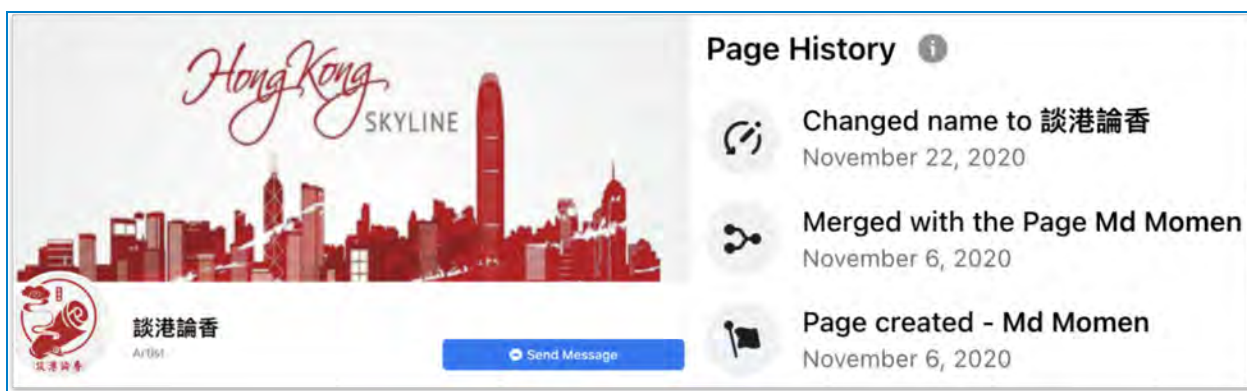


Screenshot showing Spamouflage videos with the two chyrons of Xinyue Gong, found uploaded to the Facebook page 港闻港事 @Ganggangzhai.

談港論香 Talking About Hong Kong

Another noticeable brand that looked like a news outlet was 談港論香 (Talking about Hong Kong), which had an associated [Facebook page](#) created on November 6, 2020. According to Facebook records, the page was first named “Md Momen” - which suggests a Bengali-named owner by the name of Mohammad Momen - and it changed to “談港論香” on November 22, 2020. The page was merged with another one of the same name on the day it was created, a pattern that has characterized many Spamouflage assets.

Graphika found multiple Spamouflage assets amplifying videos with the chyron of this brand. These videos predominantly push for pro-Beijing and pro-establishment views on Hong Kong matters.



Screenshot of the cover image, logo, and page history of Facebook page “談港論香”.



Screenshot of example videos shared by Spamuflage assets with the brand marking of “談港論香”. The left was uploaded to YouTube, titled “除殘去亂提訊裁判 港獨分子再難囂張”. The right was found on Facebook, titled “法律面前人人平等 議員違法豈有特權”. Both videos were targeting pro-democracy figures in Hong Kong.

港人講地 Speakout HK

The last outstanding example described here points to how the Spamuflage operation takes advantage of existing authentic media outlets to promote its agendas. Graphika has noticed that a good number of Spamuflage assets amplified videos and video clips with the brand marking of 港人講地 (Speakout HK).

Speakout HK is a Hong Kong-registered online news [site](#) that launched in 2013. It is owned by Hong Kong United Foundation (HKUF), an “independent nonprofit organization set up by a group of responsible and Hong Kong-loving friends,” according to HKUF’s [website](#). HKUF was co-founded in 2012 by Barry Cheung Chun-yuen, former non-official member of the Executive Council of Hong Kong, and Raymond Tang Yee-Bong, an adviser to former Hong Kong Chief Executive Leung Chun-ying.

Speakout HK has been promoting pro-establishment content on Instagram, YouTube, Facebook, Weibo and its own mobile application since it was founded. According to a poll conducted by the Chinese University of Hong Kong’s Communication and Public Opinion Survey Center in November 2019, Speakout ranked [last for public credibility](#) among ten Hong Kong online media sites, with a score of 4.29. Speakout HK’s pro-Beijing and pro-establishment content has surfaced in Spamuflage videos over and over again, demonstrating the operation’s willingness to borrow from authentic media outlets to the extent their reports serve its agendas.



Screenshot of a Spamouflage asset sharing a video titled [“眾志”淪為“眾棄”，裹挾無邪青年](#) (“Aspiration reduced to abandonment”) which criticizes pro-democracy group Demosistō.

Part Two: Spotting Spamouflage

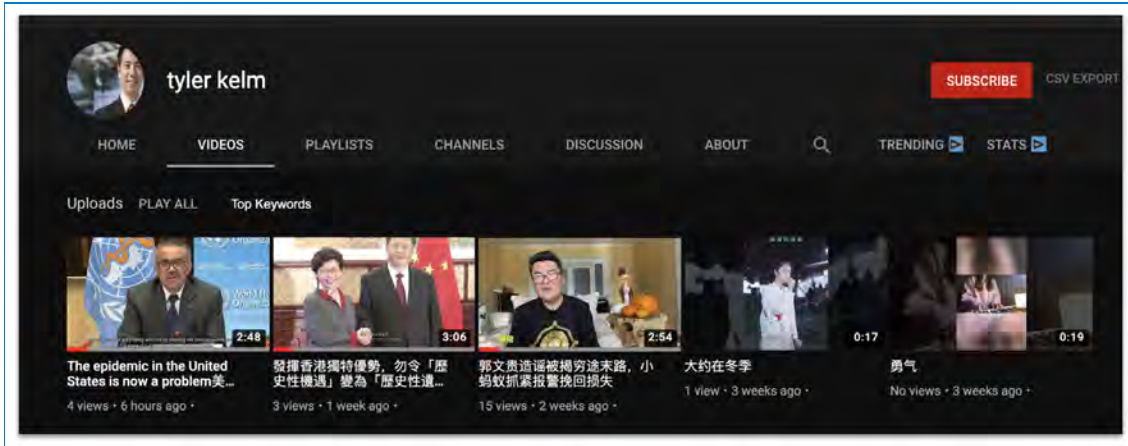
Behavior

This report identifies assets and videos that belong to the Spamouflage operation according to two axes of evidence: behavior and content. Content clues serve to discover possible members of the network, but it is the behavioral clues that allow us to identify high-confidence assets.

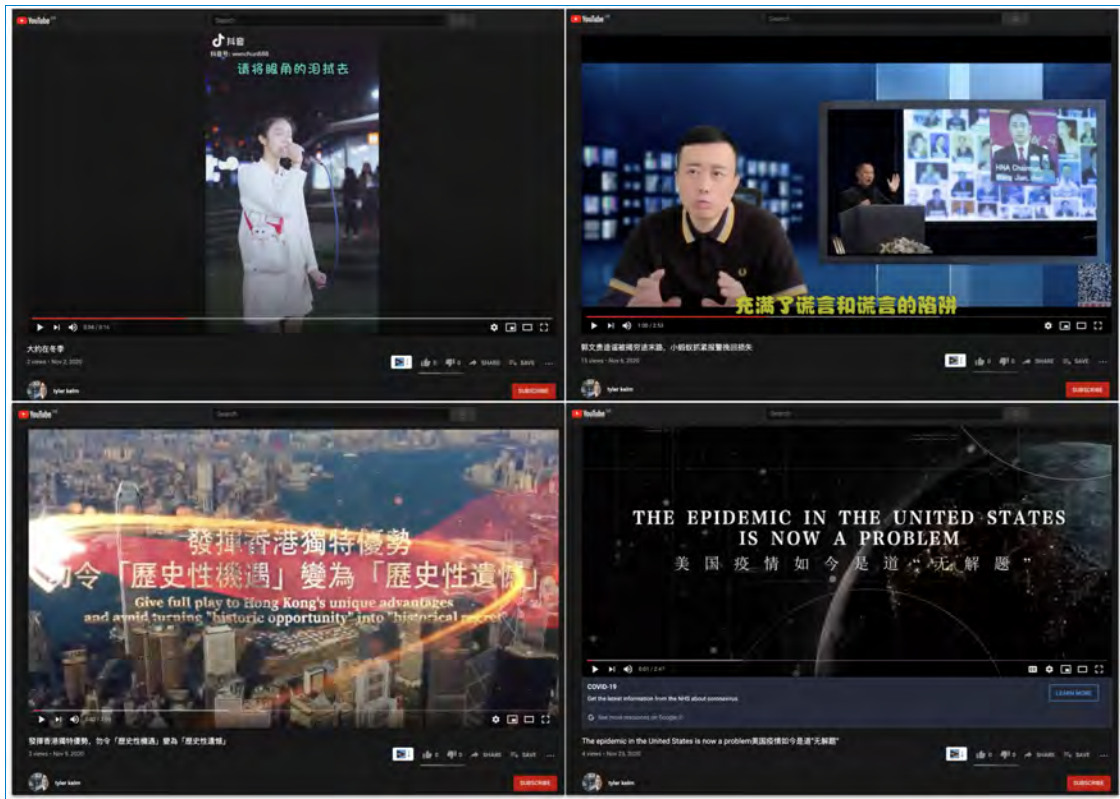
Graphika has been actively monitoring Spamouflage since we first exposed it in September 2019. The operation's list of topics has progressively expanded to five main issues; in this report, we will refer to them as the Five Themes.

- Exiled Chinese billionaire and regime critic Guo Wengui (from July 2018);
- The Hong Kong pro-democracy movement (from early 2019);
- China's achievements in economic growth, trade, foreign policy and fighting COVID-19 (from early 2020), contrasted with
- The United States' failures in economic growth, social stability, foreign policy and fighting COVID-19 (also from early 2020);
- Direct U.S.-China rivalry (such as over sanctions, tariffs, and their respective restrictions on technology products and services from mid-2020).

Throughout the operation, the content on Guo Wengui has been in Mandarin Chinese. The great majority of Hong Kong-focused content has been in Cantonese, although a few assets posted dual Chinese-English headlines as well. Content on China's achievements, COVID-19 and U.S.-China rivalry has either been in Mandarin Chinese or in English with Chinese subtitles. However, on many occasions, Graphika identified accounts, especially YouTube channels, that posted videos in both language settings and on multiple themes, indicating that the network is likely not divided into separate sections based on language.

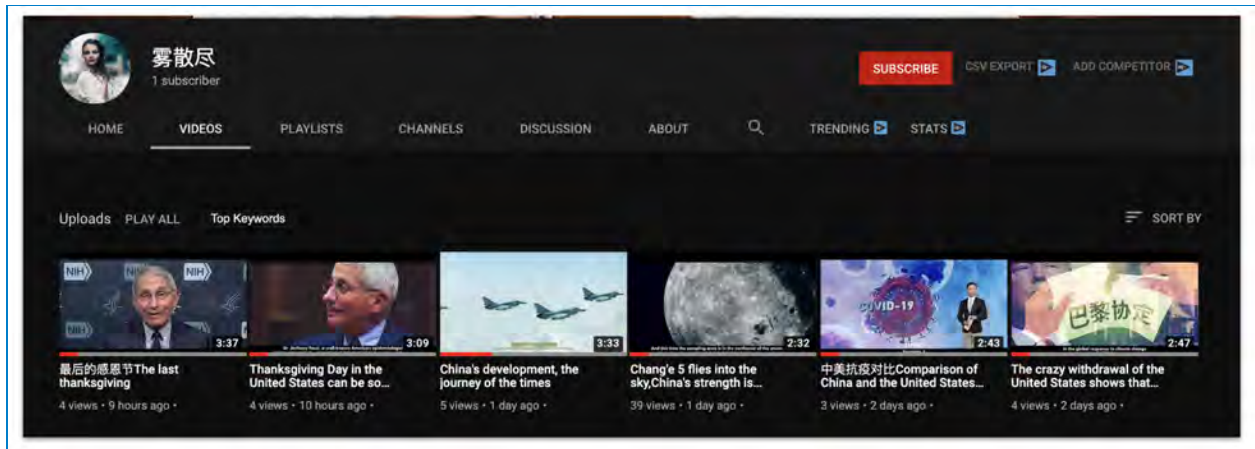


All the videos posted by the late YouTube channel "tyler kelm," created on September 23, 2020. The earliest two are typical spam posts (or "spamouflage," in the sense of spam used to camouflage otherwise political channels), under 20 seconds long and copied from TikTok. The third translates as "Guo Wengui's rumor was revealed and he was dead, and the little ant rushed to call the police to recover the loss." The fourth translates as "Give full play to Hong Kong's unique advantages and not turn 'historic opportunities' into 'historical regrets'", which was also its English subtitle.

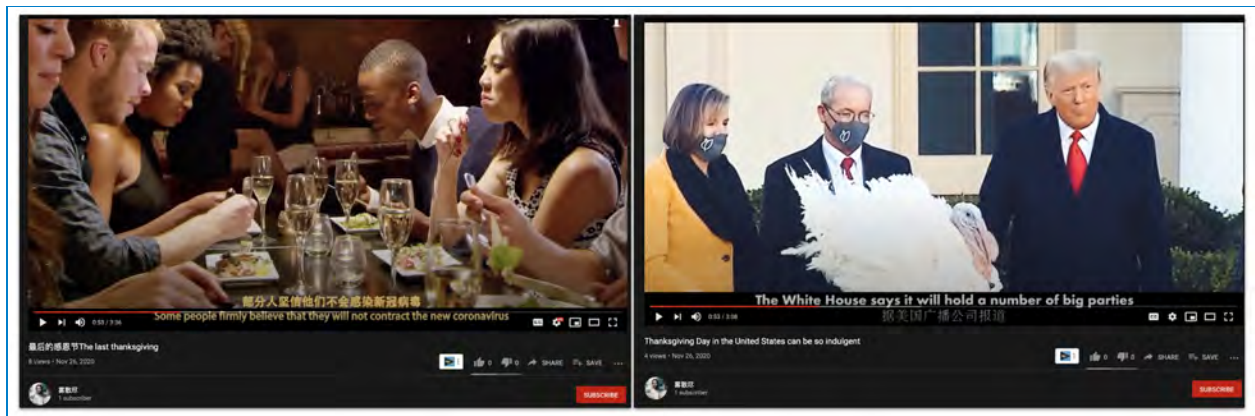


Close-ups of four of the account's five videos, showing the different Spamouflage themes and content styles from a single asset: TikTok (as shown by the logo at top left), Chinese-language with Chinese subtitles (and an image of Guo in the background), Chinese-language with English subtitles (concerning Hong Kong), and English-language with Chinese subtitles.

Increasingly through the second half of 2020, Spamouflage proliferated its videos, with multiple productions in the same language covering the same theme on the same day. This may indicate that the network drew on different content production facilities, an impression reinforced by the fact that different videos had different fonts, visual styles and auto-generated voices. Again, however, multiple, apparently “competing” videos sometimes appeared on the same channels at almost the same time, demonstrating that content from (possibly) different facilities still ended up in the same distribution network.



All the videos posted by Spamouflage YouTube channel “雾散尽” The latest (left-hand) two were both posted on November 26 and dealt with Thanksgiving and COVID-19. The others dealt, in order left to right, with China’s progress, its launch of a Moon lander, a comparison of the U.S. and China’s handling of COVID-19, and the U.S. withdrawal from the Open Skies Treaty.



Detail of the two Thanksgiving-themed videos from the same account. Both were uploaded on November 26, the left-hand one at 13:07 UTC, the right-hand one at 12:59 UTC. The videos had different automated voices; the left-hand one had its subtitles in yellow with Mandarin above, the right-hand one had white subtitles with English above.

Since June 2020, the vast bulk of content has consisted of videos, sometimes posted by fake accounts on YouTube and amplified by fake accounts on other platforms, sometimes embedded by Spamouflage assets directly into their tweets on Twitter or their posts on Facebook. The

videos were typically between 2:30” and 3:30” long, and featured collages of images from Western news outlets with a voice-over and subtitles. Some videos were only in Mandarin or Cantonese, and appeared to have been voiced by a native speaker; others had an English voice-over that appeared to have been generated by a text-to-voice service and often produced clunky results. Many of the videos featured bilingual titles that read like propaganda slogans or poetic sayings, such as, “China A responsible country for peaceful development” and “The water of the American people can no longer carry the boat of the presidential government.”

The production value of videos was generally low. Many of the automated voice-overs featured unnatural rhythms and pauses, and struggled with acronyms (for example, pronouncing “U.S. government” as “us government,” “COVID-19” as “C.O. vid-19”, and the period at the end of a sentence as “dot”). Some videos contained language errors or mistakes in context, such as videos whose texts were focused on the United States but whose footage featured other countries. One video was headlined “Humanitariandisaster,theU S epidemiccontinuestodeteriorate,” in apparent ignorance of the space bar.



Stills from Spamuflage video “The U S epidemic continues to worsen, the U S ushered in a cold winter美国疫情持续恶化 全美迎来凛冽寒冬,” November 2020. While the voice-over described the situation in the American Midwest and the reaction by local (American) authorities, the video showed UK Prime Minister Boris Johnson, followed by imagery of Spanish ambulances, identifiable as such by the license plates, word “Ambulancia” and “Comunidad de Madrid” logo.



Tweet of a Spamuflage video by operation asset @abeycorp. The use of "Freudian" refers, not to the Viennese psychoanalyst, but to George Floyd, whose name was re-interpreted as "Freud" by a number of Spamuflage posts.

The following list indicates a handful of common behavioral clues that apply across platforms. It is shared for the purpose of discovery and investigation: as with all investigative exercises, high confidence requires multiple indicators, and any one indicator taken in isolation is insufficient.

- Accounts that repeatedly or exclusively post videos on the Five Themes with automated text-to-voice audio reading out English-language subtitles, with Chinese subtitles in parallel;
- Accounts with apparently English names (often uncommon names such as "Gonzales Swindlehurst" and "Bathsheba Lyons") that exclusively post Chinese-language or bilingual Chinese-English content on the Five Themes;
- Batches of accounts with similar creation dates that amplify each other and all reply to or comment on each other's content, forming distinct clusters;
- Demonstrably fake accounts that mainly or exclusively post content on the Five Themes;
- Accounts that intersperse bilingual or Chinese-language videos with spammy series of scenery images, short videos (10-20 seconds, typically copied from TikTok) or feel-good quotes, often many spam posts on one day;

- Accounts that were active several years ago on issues unrelated to China or Spamuflage (often in other languages), but then fell silent, to resume activity with spam posts and videos on the Five Themes in recent months.
- On Facebook, pages that were merged with a page of the same name on the day they were created;
- Also on Facebook, pages that originally had Bangladeshi names but switched to Chinese.



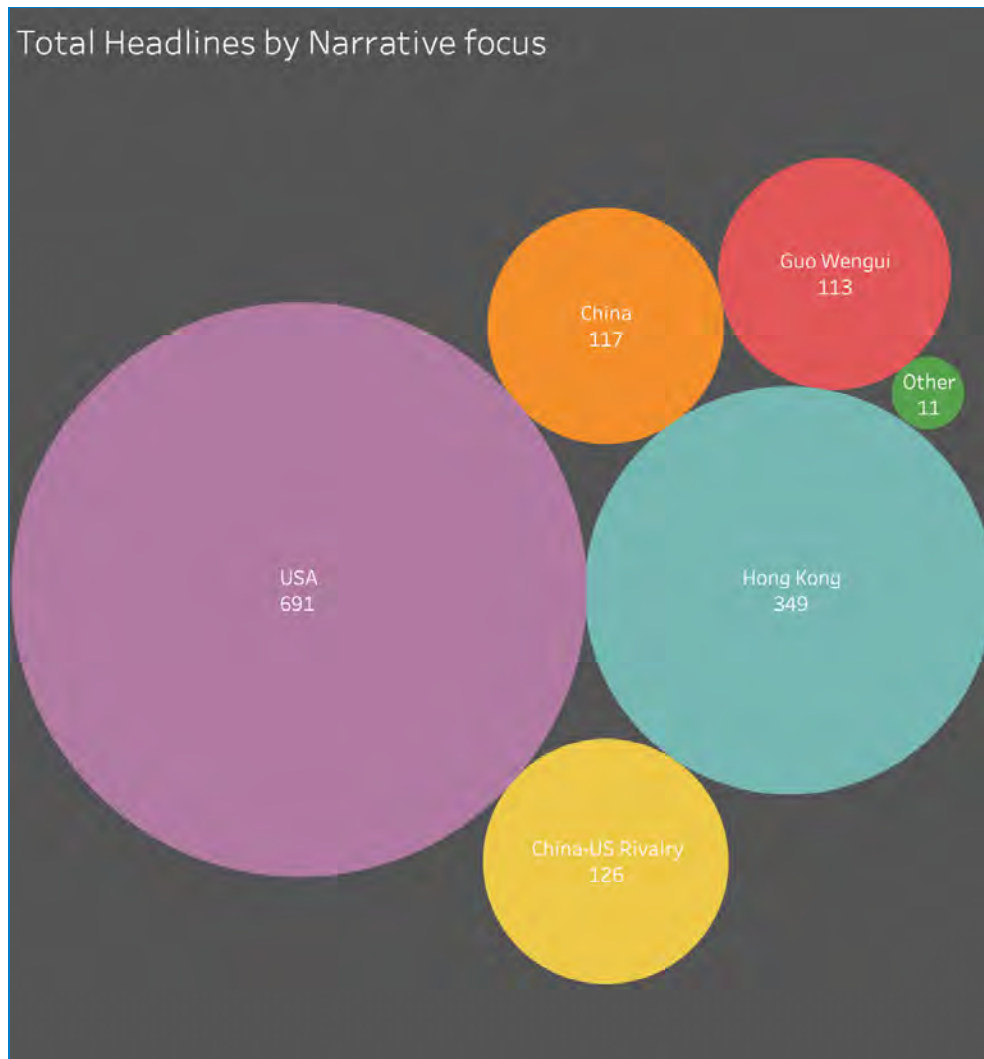
Snapshot of the amplification of Spamuflage video “Turkeys on charity, tooThis Thanksgiving is too cold 火鸡也得靠救济？这个感恩节太冷.....”, November 22-23, 2020, by accounts that showed various typical signs of their Spamuflage affiliation. Center, YouTube channel [Giovanni Twiggs](#), which was created on November 16, posted two short wildlife clips that day, and then posted the Spamuflage video on November 23 as its last post. Bottom left, Twitter account [Tanisha Johnson](#), a fake account in the “Dracula” series, which tweeted a link to Giovanni. The same video was embedded in Facebook page (top left) [落忆无痕](#), ostensibly a TV / movie award, which started life with a different name and was merged with a page of that name on the day it was created. Right, four of the YouTube channels that posted the video on the same day: [michael dartu](#) (note the female face), [Dhakker Babber](#), [Benjamin Riley](#) and [苙夕](#).

The Five Themes

As described above, Spamuflage began posting attacks on Guo Wengui in mid-2018 and added attacks on the Hong Kong protesters into its repertoire in mid-2019. These themes continued through to the present day, and were joined by defense of China’s response to COVID-19 (February 2020), and bilingual English-Chinese attacks on the U.S. and praise of China (from June 2020).

Graphika analyzed Spamuflage’s output from February 2020 through to January 2021, and collected the headlines of as many Spamuflage videos as could be identified. This approach was a response to the network’s rapid use and disposal (or loss) of different assets and the difficulty of automating detection; while certainly incomplete, it yielded over 1,400 unique videos with headlines in English, Mandarin or Cantonese (the latter primarily targeting Hong Kong). Between June and December, 2020, it typically posted 3-5 new videos with an English voice-over, and the same number in Chinese, per day.

The chart below shows Spamouflage's targeting and approximate volume over 11 months, based on videos that we have been able to identify with high confidence as belonging to the network. Given how many assets have been taken down in recent months, it likely severely undercounts the early 2020 portion of activity. But it does show the very heavy volume of content targeted at the United States and the Hong Kong pro-democracy movement in recent months in the sample we collected, and a special focus on the China-U.S. rivalry - trends which we saw continuing into the new year.



Graphic showing main themes covered by Spamouflage from February to the end of December 2020. Note that videos on events in the US and Hong Kong outnumber all other topics.

Guo Wengui

Guo, an exiled Chinese billionaire, critic of the Chinese Communist Party and ally of right-wing U.S. personality Steve Bannon, has been a target of Spamouflage from the earliest days we have been able to identify. As early as the summer of 2018, Spamouflage assets were posting anti-Guo content; many of their shares came from a YouTube channel called “YY FSJ 谣言粉碎机” (“Rumor shredder”) that was taken down in late 2019 and formed the backbone of Spamouflage’s early video production, as Graphika [reported](#) at the time.

Assets in the network focused on Guo throughout the operation. As late as November 2020, Spamouflage YouTube channels were still posting attacks on Guo, his TV station GTV, his fashion brand GFashion, and other properties associated with him.



Still from a Spamouflage video posted by asset 华生; note the hashtag reference to GTV in the text at bottom left. The headline reads, “Guo lied to prophesy, but he used his skills to reproduce rumors.” This account was created in 2011. It began posting Hindi music videos on August 28, 2017, and posted 37 videos in under 24 hours. It then fell silent again until October 25, 2020, when it began posting spam clips from TikTok interspersed with attacks on Guo. This was likely a “matured” account bought from a third party.

Like all topics treated by the network, the Spamouflage production team's coverage of Guo has closely tracked with current events. For example, when Guo launched a luxury brand called GIFashion in October 2020, the videos were quick to call this a "scam" which demonstrated the real estate magnate was "short on money." Narrators have since assured viewers that "the end is near" for "the tortoise" - a word that in Mandarin sounds like Guo's first name.

Hong Kong Democracy

Spamouflage videos make the case, loudly and often, that "Hong Kong and the motherland share a common destiny" 香港與祖國命運與共 (the headline of a video the network posted on November 1 and again on November 6). Discrediting the Hong Kong democracy movement, asserting Chinese control over Hong Kong's institutions to be "normal", and emphasizing the economic ties between mainland China and Hong Kong have been a main theme promoted by Spamouflage since it began. Indeed, the first lead to the Spamouflage operation came in August 2019, when Twitter and Facebook took down an operation that targeted the Hong Kong protests.

Starting around the time of a major clash in June 2019 between Hong Kong Police and protestors opposing changes to the city's extradition law with China, and into December 2020, Spamouflage assets have scolded those it deemed bad actors on the Hong Kong political scene on a regular basis. Targets have included activists such as Joshua Wong and Nathan Law, university students, and pro-democratic lawmakers of the Legislative Council (LegCo). Meanwhile, the videos have praised "patriots" such as Chief Executive Carrie Lam for steering Hong Kong toward a more "promising" future and its police force for "securing order" after months of massive protests in the streets.

Assets promoted major political news stories week to week, always taking a pro-Beijing editorial line. At the time of this writing, their focus was on the youth leaders Joshua Wong, Agnes Chow and Ivan Lam pleading guilty to charges of unauthorized assembly over a 2019 protest, and the possibility they will be jailed for years.



Late October video from asset "charles carter" entitled 相似嘅顏色革命 相似嘅鬼影重重 (Similar colour revolutions, similar ghosts) casting suspicion on democracy movements in Hong Kong and Thailand. A Cantonese narrator claims anti-establishment youth leaders in both places have no real backing and have been manipulated by western powers (left); In mid-November, another Cantonese video reported on four Hong Kong opposition legislators ousted from the Legislative Council "in accordance with national law" (right)



Video posted by YouTube asset 明日港灣 of Demosistō leaders Wong, Chow and Lam speaking to reporters after West Kowloon magistrates' court hearing on November 23, 2020


Some assets appeared particularly focused on Hong Kong, and worked in coordinated clusters. For example, the Twitter account @Hongkongshanji, described above, repeatedly posted videos that promoted Chinese state talking points almost simultaneously with the Facebook page "Md Mizanur Rahaman" - sometimes only minutes apart.





Left, two tweets by @Hongkongshanji. Right, two posts by Md Mizanur Rahaman. The upper two were posted three minutes apart, with the tweet first. The lower two were posted 11 minutes apart, with the Facebook post first, indicating that this was not a question of a user on one platform deciding to copy another repeatedly.

Tellingly, the Facebook page was created on October 29, 2020, and merged with a page of the same name on the same day, a typical feature of Spamouflage assets that we observed in [earlier iterations](#) of the network.

Page Information for Md Mizanur Rahaman ⓘ

 **Md Mizanur Rahaman**
Musician

Page History ⓘ

-  **Merged with the Page Md Mizanur Rahaman**
October 29, 2020
-  **Page created - Md Mizanur Rahaman**
October 29, 2020

Facebook page transparency for Md Mizanur Rahaman.

Chinese Achievements

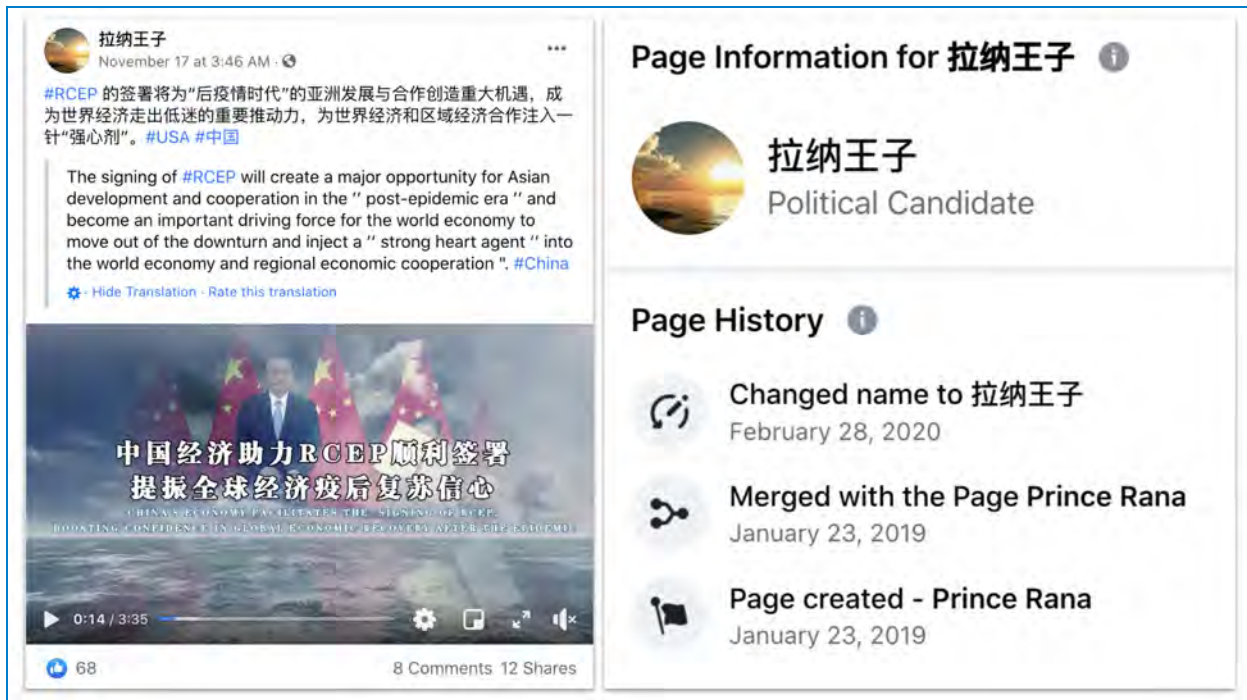
Spamouflage assets have been keen to highlight policy achievements of the Chinese government during the second half of 2020 and early 2021. Videos emphasized the domestic “recovery” of Chinese industries, advances in science and technology, and the return to everyday life since the government lifted its emergency lockdown measures in Wuhan and other major populated areas in spring 2020.

Clips in this category quoted official government sources on upward trends in the latest economic data, and encouraging statements from senior CCP officials. A number of recent videos showed President Xi Jinping and Premier Li Keqiang on “inspection tours” of central and southern China, meeting with villagers and listening to local concerns. Another less official sounding report, posted by YouTube asset "laraine binford" on September 8, showed an English-speaking foreigner describing the grand opening of the burger chain Shake Shack in Beijing’s Sanlitun district. All in all, these videos stressed China’s return to normalcy following large-scale mobilizations to contain the pandemic - in contrast to the situation in the US and Europe.



Headlines of Spamouflage YouTube videos posted to Facebook in September-October 2020; the videos were typically taken down within a few hours, but left residual traces online. From another Spamouflage Facebook page, "[Jiazhanghao](#)".

Videos in this category also played up China's overseas successes in trade and diplomacy in past months. Some clips touted Chinese contributions to "world peace" despite the year's setbacks. PLA soldiers serving as U.N. peacekeepers in conflict zones in Africa and the Middle East were hailed as heroes. Several videos in all the network's language combinations hailed the signing of the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP) on November 15. In late November, at least four videos reported on the fourteenth 'Five-Year Plan' released by the Chinese government, all with high optimism.



Left, Facebook video post by the page [拉纳王子](#) on the benefits of RCEP, headlined, “中国经济助力RCEP顺利签署，提振全球经济疫后复苏信心” (“China’s economy facilitates the signing of RCEP, boosting confidence in global economic recovery after the epidemic”). Right, page transparency for the source, showing its name change and merge.

American Failures

From late March 2020 through January 2021, Spamuflage assets kept up a sustained, bilingual, technologically evolving form of narratives focused on ‘bad news’ in the United States.¹

Most Spamuflage reports on the USA took a bleak view of the country’s ability to overcome the COVID-19 pandemic. The videos contained updates on the latest increases in confirmed cases and virus-related deaths on a national scale - with accompanying graphics to show geographic spread. Spamuflage clips usually spliced together stock images of first responders, military personnel and hospital staff and reports of shortages (e.g. PPE and ventilators) alongside sound bites of Dr. Anthony Fauci, White House Press Secretary Kayleigh McEnany, New York Governor Andrew Cuomo, Speaker of the House Nancy Pelosi and others describing the less than successful federal efforts made to keep the virus in check.

In July and August, Spamuflage-produced videos targeted President Donald Trump for his administration’s poor leadership and apparent indifference to death and casualty tolls among his own people. Under Trump, the United States had “set itself on fire and is in deep trouble” 引火烧身

¹ Many of the English-dubbed reports suffered from a robotic voice-over narrator unable to match the accent and intonations of a native speaker. But Spamuflage seems to have evolved considerably, with narrators lately using a mix of British and American accents.

的美国深陷困境, stated one report in July. The White House’s version of “herd immunity” was “dead bodies everywhere”; its “dismal performance” was “dragging the United States into an abyss” 白宫低迷的表现正在把美国拖入深 from which it may not recover, led clips from mid-August and September, respectively.

In August, many headlines were aimed at Trump personally and - as we uncovered and [disclosed](#) at the time - made explicit mention of the U.S. election. “Trump rushes to the end of decline(向着末路狂奔的特朗普)” ran one gloomy [headline](#), while another proclaimed, “Bannon's Arrest Will Be Another Watergate For The Trump Campaign!” A [third](#), in garbled style, was headlined, “Lost the support of the people&the official left &the staff officer was arrestedNo one supports Trum” (sic).

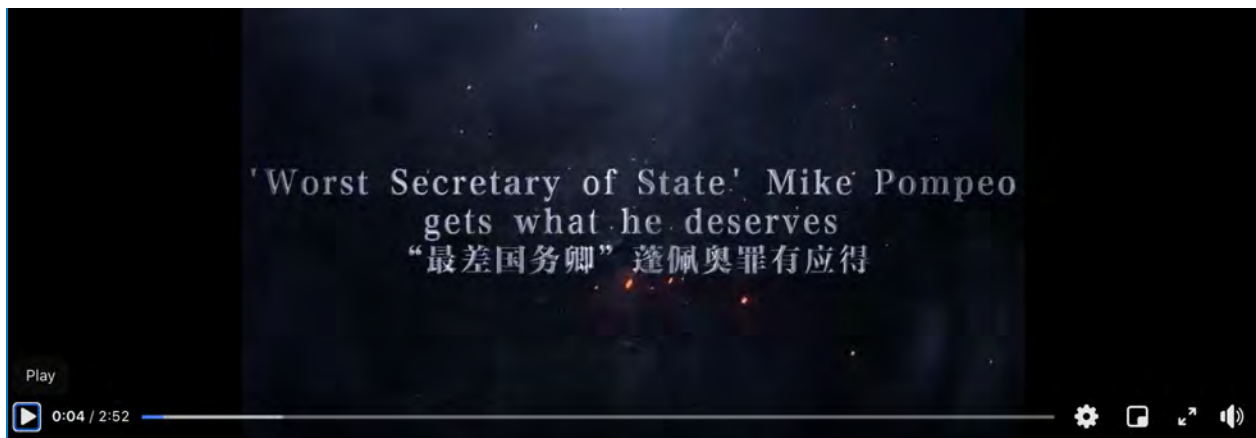


Screenshot of the [video](#) “Lost the support of the people&the official left &the staff officer was arrestedNo one supports Trum”. Note the reference to the “devil president.”

From September through November, however, headlines about Trump and mentions of the election scaled back drastically. Instead, Spamouflage focused heavily on describing what it portrayed as the imminent collapse of American society. Some highlighted the “unscientific” attitudes of many Americans who refused to wear masks in public. Others depicted widespread racial hostilities and deepening hatred between communities in major cities. Still others described the U.S. as endangering other countries by failing to bring COVID-19 under control. When treating these topics, Spamouflage scripts delivered these reports in dramatic tones:

- “When [will] the American race nightmare [be over]?” (September 8)
- “Hypocritical America, a society of cannibals” 虚伪的美国, 吃人的社会. (October 13)
- “The epidemic, riots and crisis are rampant - This is the real America!” (October 30)
- “With so much at risk, America is in a state of disarray comparable to the eve of the Civil War” (November 8)
- “Winter is coming” and America’s “darkest hour had yet to arrive” 凛冬将至, 至暗时刻还未结束. (November 11)

Several videos attacked Secretary of State Mike Pompeo, a particularly outspoken critic of China, gleefully calling him the “worst Secretary of State in the history of the United States” - an accolade earlier awarded by both the [New York Times](#) and the [Washington Post](#).



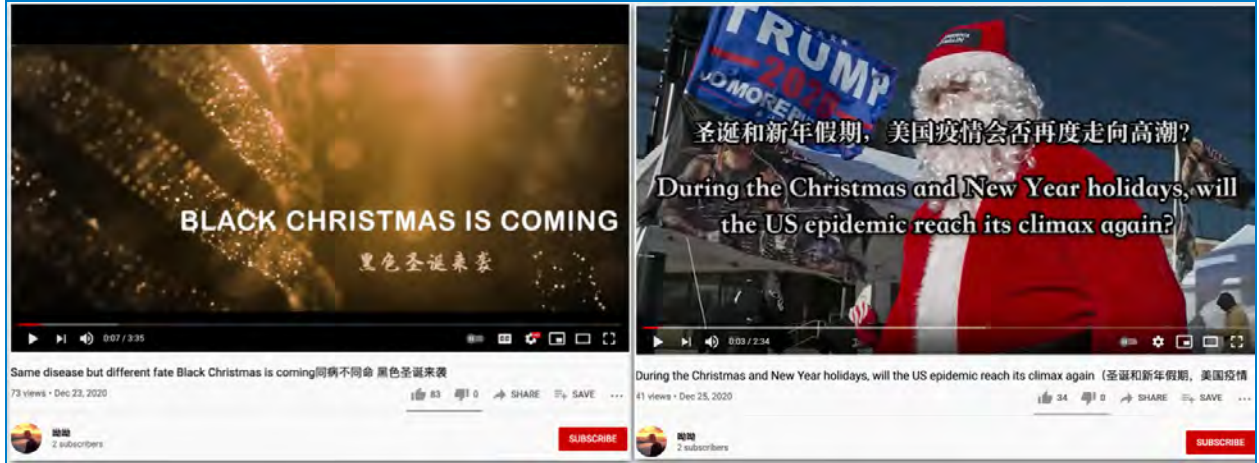
Facebook [video](#) on Pompeo, October 28.

In October and November, U.S.-focused Spamouflage videos concentrated almost entirely on COVID-19 and the continuing racial protests across the country; in the days before and immediately after the election, they did not headline the vote at all. Subsequent videos targeted the U.S. political system and both parties broadly, portraying America as a state in terminal decline steered by cynical and self-serving leaders. One clip asked viewers rhetorically what mattered more in the United States, “political power or life itself?” Thanksgiving, meanwhile, featured Spamouflage videos homing in on the suffering of everyday Americans - a bleak illustration of the superpower’s fall.



Spamouflage [headline](#), Thanksgiving 2020.

In December, Spamouflage videos essentially ignored the top political news in the United States - concerning the incoming Biden-Harris administration's cabinet nominations, and the Trump administration's legal challenges to the election outcome being filed in state and federal courts. Instead, the videos continued to highlight the general state of dysfunction and poor governance: the Trump White House continued in "the [wrong direction](#)" on COVID-19, and the president remained [incompetent](#) as ever, they asserted. Amid far-right protests before the Christmas holiday, one video pushed the narrative that "[War](#) is imminent"; another stated "America's darkest hour has arrived, and the country is steadily on the decline." The videos continued to beat a drum on the themes of chaos and government inefficiency into the new year.



Spamouflage videos featuring the worsening of the pandemic in the United States during the [Christmas](#) and [New Year holidays break](#), uploaded to a YouTube channel in December.

The January 6, 2021 storming of Capitol Hill in Washington, DC by pro-Trump mobs was a [godsend](#) for Chinese government [messaging](#). For Spamouflage operators as well, the riots presented a golden opportunity to gleefully declare -- with ample visual evidence -- that "American-style democracy" is on its deathbed.

Thematically, Spamouflage videos and media coming out of CCP outlets since January 6 have been largely indistinguishable. They have amplified two sub-themes: first, they point to the turmoil in DC as evidence that the democratic system practiced in the United States is in an irreversible state of disintegration and decline. Like Chinese state-run outlets, Spamouflage videos stressed that the U.S. system is self-evidently too fragile, unable to handle 21st century challenges, and especially not suitable for "[export](#)" to other countries.

Mid-January videos hit the above sub-theme, bearing titles such as "国会沦落：美式民主出口转内销" ("Congress fails: American-style Democracy Exports Come Home") and "所谓美食民主破裂" ("American-style democracy has [crumbled](#)"). One declared that America was "completely [running naked](#) in front of the world" after the riot. Another said that the U.S. political system was "permanently damaged" and that "political morality" in the country is now at rock bottom, making the country a "[failed state](#)."

Videos since the Capitol Hill riot also tried to score political points about Hong Kong. They claimed there was a "double standard" in how western leaders treated violence there, in contrast to the insurrection in Washington. At least three Spamouflage videos -- like hundreds of Chinese state-sponsored reports -- used the phrase "a [beautiful sight](#) to behold," with a sharp tone of sarcasm, re-using how U.S. Speaker of the House Nancy [Pelosi](#) characterized the massive anti-government demonstrations that shook Hong Kong in June 2019. Other videos hit this sub-theme with [titles](#) such as 美国“亮丽的风景线”，宣告“美式双标”破产！（America's "beautiful sight" and the declared bankruptcy of the "American double standard"!).



Screenshots of Spamouflage-style videos uploaded to the [Victor Chan fan channel](#) following the Capitol Hill riot on January 6, 2021.

After President Biden’s inauguration, Spamouflage’s messaging continued to attack the outgoing Trump administration, while also attacking the Democratic Party (whom it accused of “one-party” mentality). The prevailing message, as before, was of overall American decline, if not absolute disintegration, coupled with the inability of the ruling parties to solve the country’s problems.



Screenshot of Spamouflage video "Politics is supreme, old wine in a new bottle政治至上换汤不换药," January 26, 2021. The caption reads, "But after Biden came to power, the Democratic and Republican parties in the United States did not think about how to fight the epidemic, but how to profit from the political struggle."

Spamouflage also turned to vaccine disinformation. On January 14, it was [widely reported that](#) the Chinese COVID vaccine that had gone through final-stage testing in Brazil only had around 50 percent efficacy. Two days earlier, perhaps in anticipation, Spamouflage ran a video headlined, "Vaccines will not get America out of this mess 疫苗不能让美国疫情走出困境"; it argued that "the safety of the [U.S.-developed Pfizer-BioNTech] vaccine was in doubt, but it was quickly approved." On January 21, it followed up with another video that claimed the Pfizer-BioNTech vaccine had been approved in haste despite serious risks. These attacks on the U.S. vaccine and its efficacy are likely to have been a response to the poor press coverage of the Chinese vaccine.



Screenshot from Spamouflage video "America COVID-19 vaccine: 'Emergency use' is not the same as 'official approval.'"

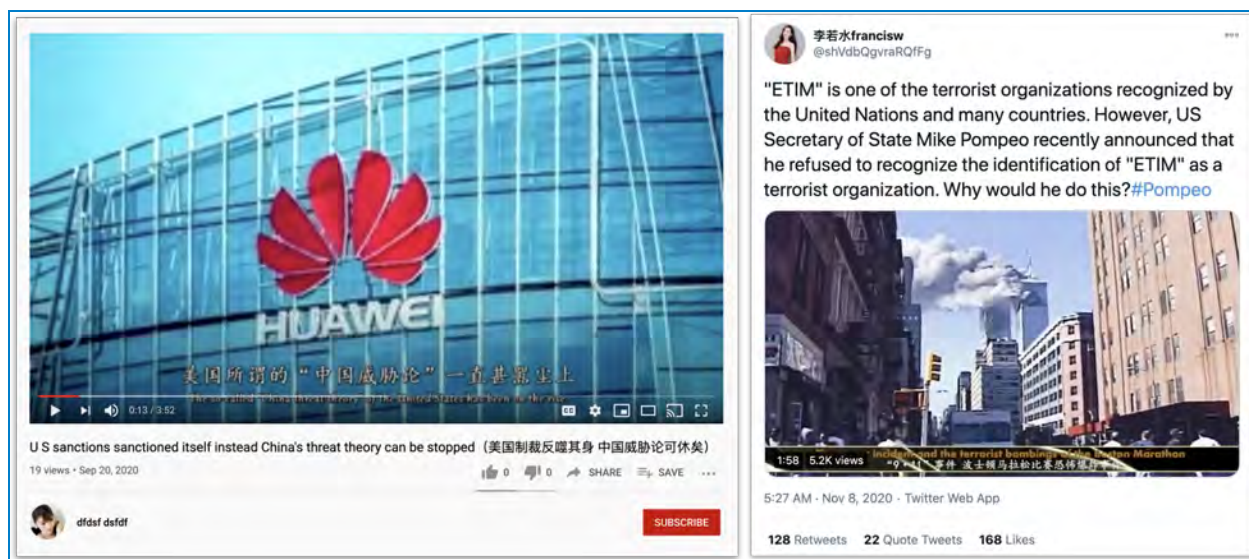
U.S.-China Rivalry

The final Spamouflage theme made the contrast between a rising China and falling America explicit. This was the focus on China-U.S. rivalry, which has created controversies this year in trade, I.T., global health and human rights policy-making. Spamouflage videos accused the United States of distracting from the fight against COVID-19 by "shamelessly targeting China" at home and abroad.

For example, Spamouflage assets criticized U.S. targeting of Chinese I.T. companies on at least four occasions. In August, after the White House issued executive orders effectively banning TikTok and WeChat in the United States, assets amplified statements from the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs that blasted the "double standards" and "hypocrisy" of the unilateral action. They went even further, asserting the U.S. was "stealing TikTok away" in an "open robbery," and that "It's just an ordinary day for Donald Trump." Regarding U.S. State Department moves to discourage third countries such as Brazil from signing deals with Huawei, another video stated everything boiled down to Trump's bid to get re-elected and had nothing to do with American "national security" arguments.

Also in sync with official Chinese government statements, Spamouflage assets criticized U.S. legislative actions touching on Chinese sovereignty in Xinjiang province and Hong Kong. For instance, during the summer, assets were busy condemning U.S. protection of Hong Kong pro-democracy group leaders; they also challenged U.S. Treasury sanctions against Hong Kong officials with links to the Chinese Communist Party. In early November, a Spamouflage video was

dedicated to analysing Pompeo's motives in de-listing the "East Turkestan Independence Movement" (ETIM) as a group whose members were previously banned from entering the United States.



Screenshot of Spamouflage YouTube asset "dfdsf dsfdf" video lamenting U.S. sanctions against Huawei (left); Li Ruoshui shares [video](#) arguing American counter-terror policy "hypocritical" for denying East Turkestan Independence Movement a terror group (right).

After the race protests in the United States, and even more after the storming of the Capitol, Spamouflage assets were quick to contrast the U.S. police - portrayed as brutal, racist and violent - with the Chinese police, whom it portrayed as restrained, civil and self-sacrificing. As before, this activity interlocked perfectly with Chinese state propaganda. For example, on January 25, 2021, China's state tabloid the Global Times [reported](#) on a Chinese policeman who knelt and offered himself in exchange for a young hostage. The Global Times piece reported on Chinese social media users who compared this with the U.S. policeman who killed George Floyd: "Chinese netizens comment on comparison between kneeling Chinese and American policemen," ran the headline. One of those "netizens" was fake persona He Jingrun.



贺景润 He Jingrun
@jingrun_china



Left: Chinese police

Right: American police



7:49 AM · Jan 24, 2021 · Twitter Web App [IMG](#)

2 Retweets 11 Likes

Tweet by He Jingrun on January 24, contrasting the Chinese and American policemen.

On January 20, the day of Biden's inauguration, the Chinese government sanctioned 28 U.S. officials, including Pompeo, for "interference" in what it termed China's internal affairs. Spamouflage was quick to justify the move: on January 22, it ran at least two bilingual videos on the event. One was headlined, "Chinese sword! It is necessary to punish 28 U.S. politicians." The other, released nearly simultaneously, was headlined, "Virus politicians will eventually pay for their actions!" At least one Spamouflage Facebook page published the two videos just a few minutes apart, at 11:39 and 11:43 UTC on January 22.



Screenshots of two videos posted by Spamouflage page 琳达 on January 22, 2021, four minutes apart. Both focused on China's sanctions decision.

COVID-19 provided continuous, fertile grounds for Spamouflage to make its contrast explicit. One [video](#) in particular, on November 24, was headlined, "Comparison of China and the United States in the fight against COVID-19." Its comparisons were not flattering towards the United States.



Still from the comparison [video](#), November 24.

Overall, these five themes painted a consistent narrative. China was portrayed as benevolent, stable, increasingly prosperous, and peaceful. Guo Wengui and the Hong Kong protesters were presented as criminals, swindlers, and puppets of foreign powers. The U.S. was described as aggressive, unreliable, chaotic, divided, and no longer capable of playing a constructive role on the world stage.

As we noted above, these messages mark Spamouflage out as a geopolitical cheerleader for the Chinese government and Communist Party. The use of both English and Chinese simultaneously meant that it was hardly trying to mask its affiliation or pose as citizens of other countries in the manner of, for example, previous operations targeting the U.S. and attributed to Russian actors; rather, it appears to be an attempt to describe China as good and America as bad to as wide an international audience as possible.

Batch Watch

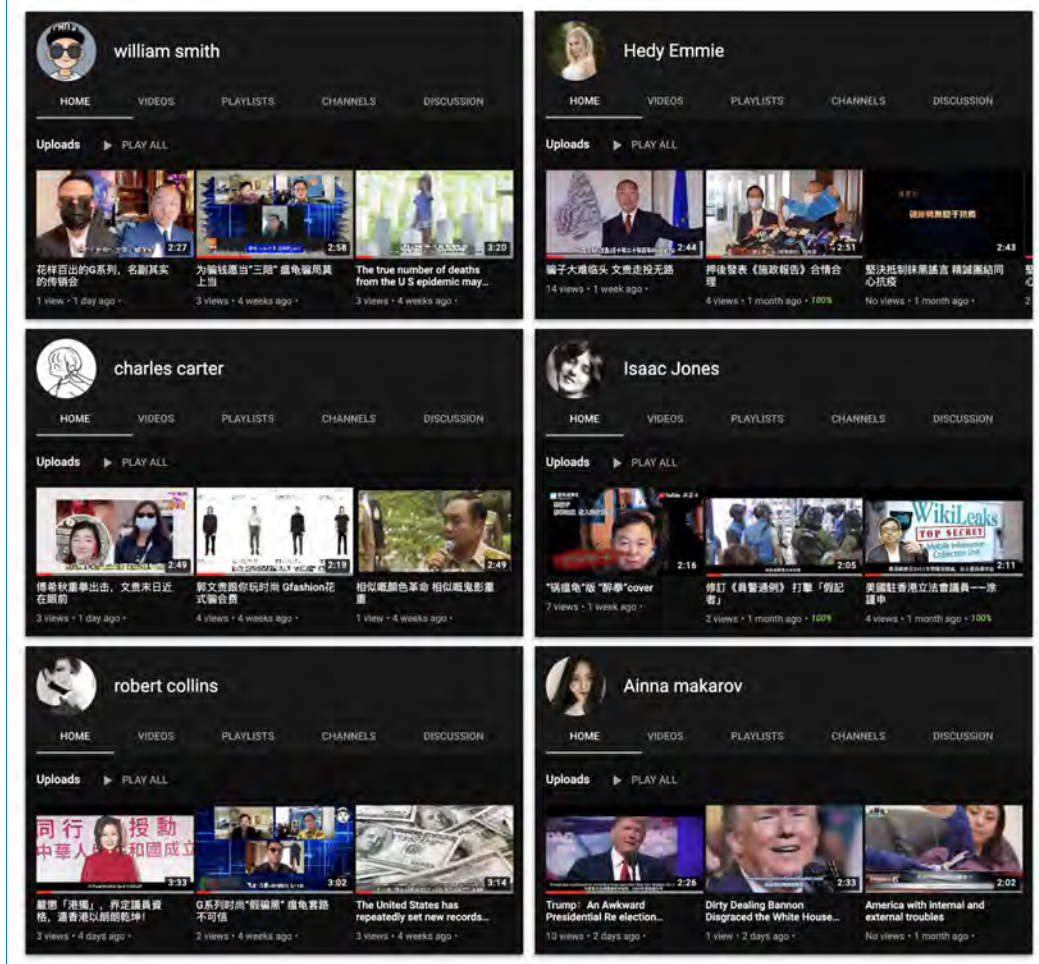
The above examples illustrate Spamouflage's new tactic: using fake personas to generate engagement. Those examples, while important, represent only a minority of the network's total output. It continued to post far more content from low-quality spam accounts that it most likely bought in bulk from online providers across all three of its platforms. This use of the online market in fake accounts gives Spamouflage access to an apparently inexhaustible supply of assets and allows the operators to obfuscate some clues to their identities, but it also suggests a lower level of sophistication.

The remainder of this report illustrates that spammy, likely bought, community of fakes.

YouTube

Despite multiple waves of detection and enforcement, YouTube continued to serve as Spamouflage's primary platform, where it made use of two types of assets. The first were newly created channels - typically only hours or days old when they started posting - that only shared Spamouflage videos. These usually had English-language names, often without capitalization, and were created in batches.

For example, the accounts william smith, charles carter, and robert collins were all created between September 6 and September 16. Each one only posted three videos: one on October 20, one on October 21, and one in the third week of November. They were also active commentators on other Spamouflage videos, including those posted by three accounts that were all created on September 22: Hedy Emmie, Isaac Jones, and Ainna makarov.



Six Spamouflage YouTube accounts that formed part of a self-reinforcing cluster. Left column, william smith, charles carter and robert collins. Each account only posted three videos, all from Spamouflage: one each on October 20 and October 21, and one in mid-November. All three accounts were created in early September. Right column, Hedy Emmie, Isaac Jones and Ainna makarov, all created on September 22, 2020. Note the language mix across the set.

The network's use of such accounts, especially for its English-language videos, increased throughout the year as YouTube took down its more established assets. These accounts typically had no followers and very few views (usually in double digits or low triple digits).

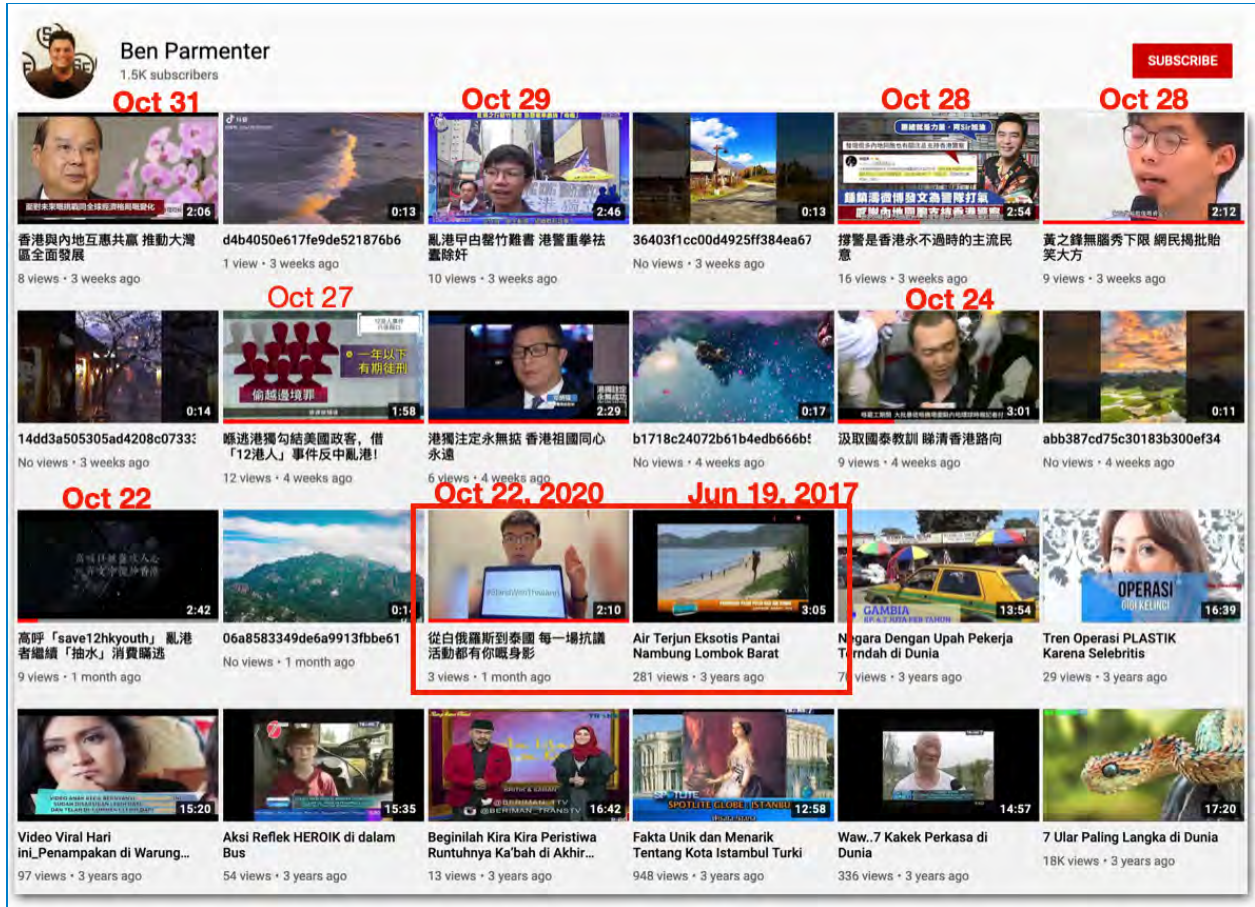
Such accounts formed self-reinforcing clusters: they regularly commented on each other's videos, providing the appearance of audience engagement. It is possible that the operators also used them to view each other's videos for the same reason, since many videos had identical or near-identical numbers of comments and views.



Left to right, replies to videos by [daniel evans](#), [christopher garcia](#) (headlined “America is jealous of China but contradicts itself (美国“眼红发酸”抹黑中国却遭自我打脸)” and [charles carter](#) (in Chinese only, headlined “郭文贵跟你玩时尚 Gfashion花式骗会费”, which translates as “Guo Wengui plays fashion with you, Gfashion fancy scam membership fee”). Note the replies from william smith and robert collins as well.

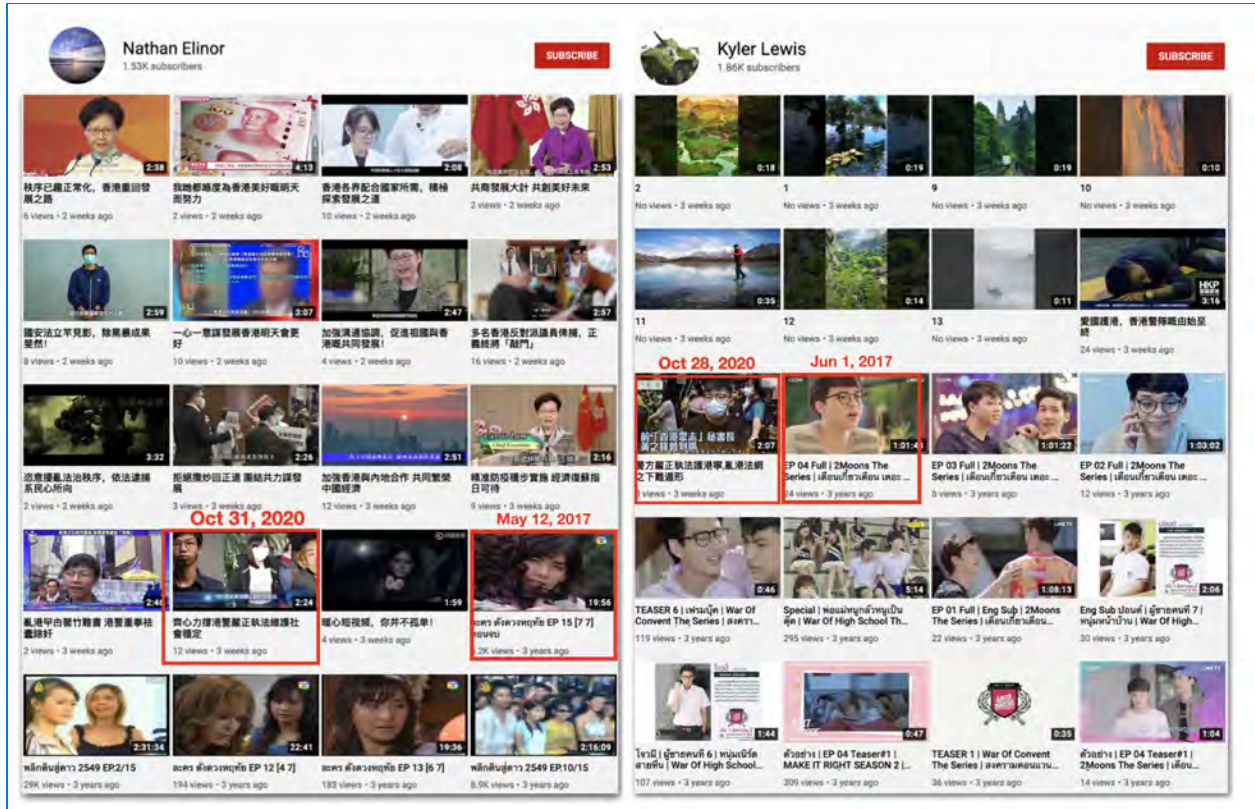
The other type of asset, which featured particularly in the Chinese-language content and posts attacking Guo Wengui, was represented by YouTube channels that were created in 2017-18, or even earlier. These typically had far higher overall viewing figures - often in the tens or hundreds of thousands - and between 1,000 and 2,000 followers, but their views almost entirely came from unrelated videos that they posted soon after they were created, such as movies in Hindi, Portuguese or Indonesian. These accounts invariably fell silent for several years, and when they returned to posting, they first posted a set of very short videos (10 to 20 seconds long) of scenery or TikTok clips, and then began posting Spamouflage content. It is unlikely that Spamouflage created these accounts three years ago and let them age; it is far more likely that the operation bought them as “aged accounts” from an online service, and repurposed them for their own purposes.

In the example of the YouTube channel “Ben Parmenter”, the channel had been posting non-political Indonesian videos in 2017, which accumulated a large percentage of the channel’s total views (246,078 videos as of writing). The channel went dormant since 2018 until it suddenly began posting Cantonese Spamouflage videos (e.g., “[從白俄羅斯到泰國 每一場抗議活動都有你嘅身影](#)”, which translates as “From Belarus to Thailand, you are present in every protest activity” - the “you” being the United States government) in October 2020.



Partial video posting history of the YouTube channel “[Ben Parmenter](#)”. Created on October 24, 2009, the channel accumulated 1,500 subscribers and nearly 250,000 views. Most of the video views came from non-political Indonesian videos it posted in 2017. In October 2020, the channel began displaying typical Spamouflage asset behaviours.

The same pattern applied to the channels “Nathan Elinor” and “Kyler Lewis,” created in 2017 and 2014, respectively. Each had a little under 2,000 subscribers, each posted non-Spamouflage content in different languages until 2018 (Indonesian reports and Thai LGBTQ series 2Moons, respectively), and each fell silent until October 2020, when they began posting Chinese Spamouflage videos. Nathan Elinor amassed 89,000 views (mostly with two videos on June 1, 2017), Kyler Lewis amassed 95,000 (mostly with four videos on May 11-12, 2017). The key difference was that Nathan Elinor only posted Spamouflage videos after its revival, while Kyler Lewis also posted short clips of colorful scenery from TikTok.



Video posting history of YouTube channels “[Nathan Elinor](#)” created on May 5, 2017(left) and “[Kyler Lewis](#)” created on January 24, 2014 (right). Both accounts were posting non-political non-Chinese videos three years ago, generating most of the channels’ total views. Both went dormant in 2018 and remained so until they began posting Spamouflaged videos in October 2020.

The key difference in the use of these different sorts of channels was that assets that primarily posted in Chinese tended to use aged accounts, while assets that primarily posted English headlines tended to use newly created ones. This may reflect an operational decision, or the fact that YouTube appears to have had a higher success rate in taking down English-language videos at an early stage, forcing the operators to acquire new assets for further English videos. (As noted above, many channels posted headlines in both languages; these were a mixture of aged and new accounts.)

Facebook

The majority of Spamouflaged’s posts on Facebook were made by pages, rather than profiles, perhaps to reduce the network’s exposure to Facebook authentication rules (since one account can create multiple pages).

Facebook’s page transparency settings have revealed a number of specific features about these assets. The settings routinely give the name history of pages on the network. For pages with over

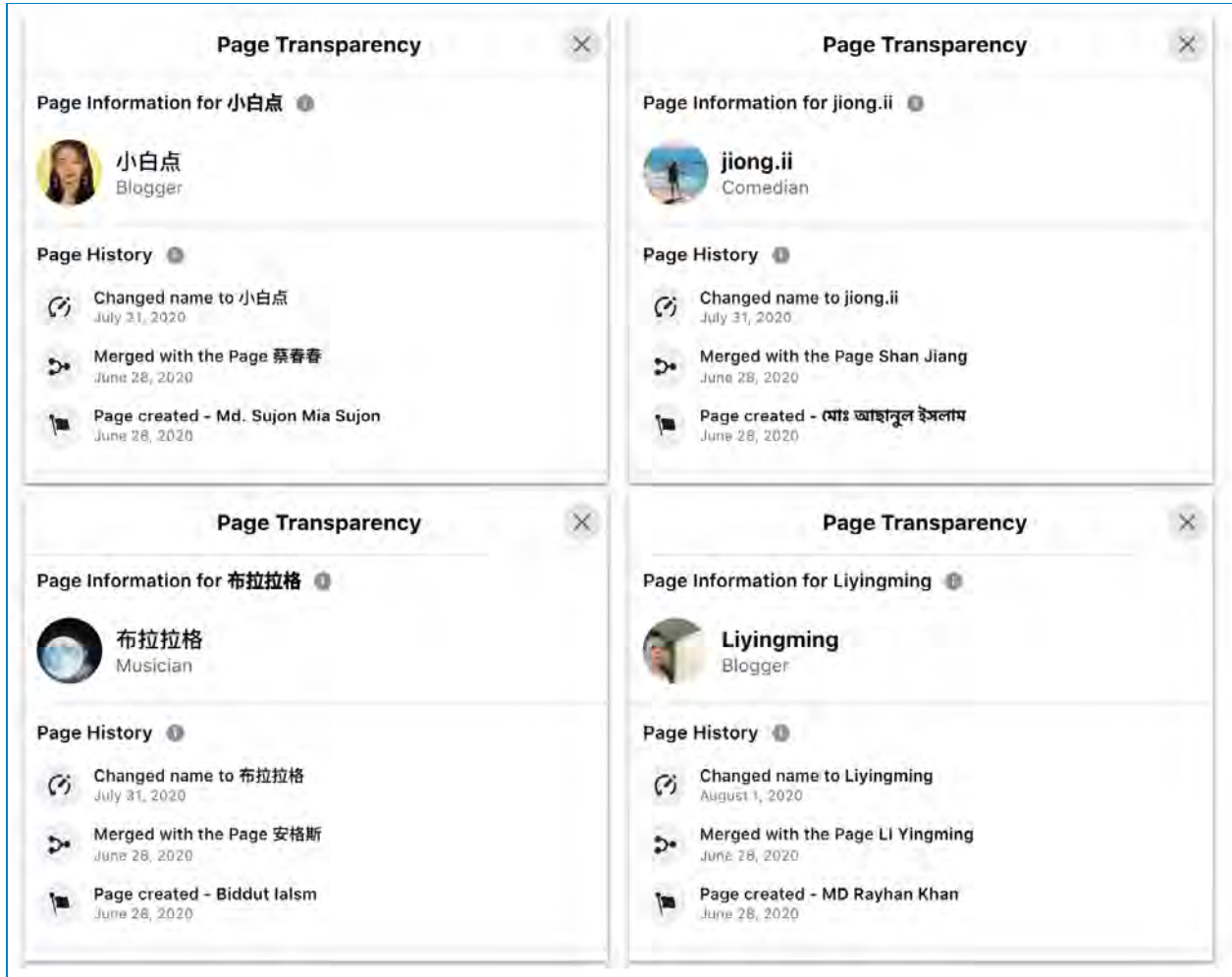
5,000 followers, and some pages with lower followings, they also indicate which country (or countries) the page is run from.²

In the case of Spamouflage, many of the pages followed a standard pattern: they originally had the names of young Bangladeshi men and used profile pictures to match. They were typically merged with a page of the same name on the date they were created.³ Many then changed their names to a Chinese phrase some days or weeks after creation.

It would be an unusual move for a Chinese network, focused on Chinese interests, to create apparently Bangladeshi pages and then to rename them a few weeks later. It is more likely that these fake pages were originally created by a like-farm [in Bangladesh](#), and then transferred to Spamouflage and re-named for their new purpose. (As Graphika has [already reported](#), earlier iterations of Spamouflage showed the same pattern of Bangladeshi pages, but seldom changed their names to Chinese ones; the current pattern of re-naming their assets seems likely to be an attempt at camouflage.)

² Many of the Spamouflage Facebook pages that appeared to have been created by a like-farm in Bangladesh had between 3,500 and 4,500 followers, but showed almost no engagement on individual posts. We suspect that these followings were generated inauthentically and capped at just under 5,000 to avoid the transparency trap.

³ Merging two pages allows the operator to add the old page's following to the new page. This is likely how so many of these pages acquired between 3,500 and 4,500 followers.



Page Transparency for 小白点 (allegedly a blogger), jiong.li (allegedly a comedian), Liyingming (also allegedly a blogger) and 布拉拉格 (allegedly a musician). All were created on June 28, 2020; all originally had Bangladeshi names; all changed their names on July 31-August 1, 2020.



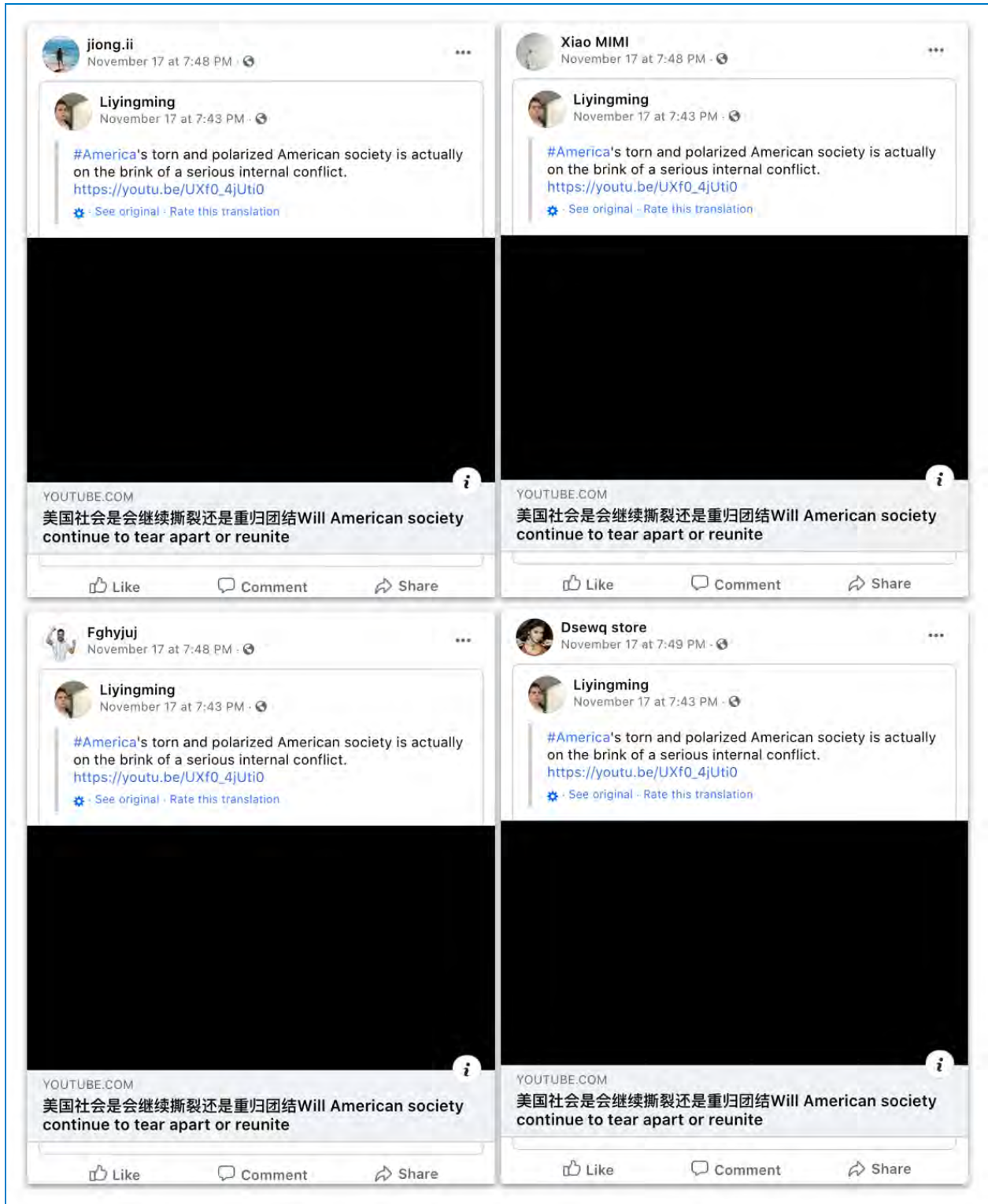
The original profile pictures for three of the pages, June 28, 2020. Liyingming's profile picture appears to have been deleted from its timeline.

The pages used a wide variety of self-descriptions, including bloggers, musicians, books, shops, movies, and community groups, but their behavior was constant: they posted a mix of Spamouflage videos and comments with innocuous posts of scenery, models or “wise” sayings. For most of 2020, they posted links to YouTube videos; later in the year, some began embedding the videos directly, presumably to avoid the impact of YouTube takedowns.



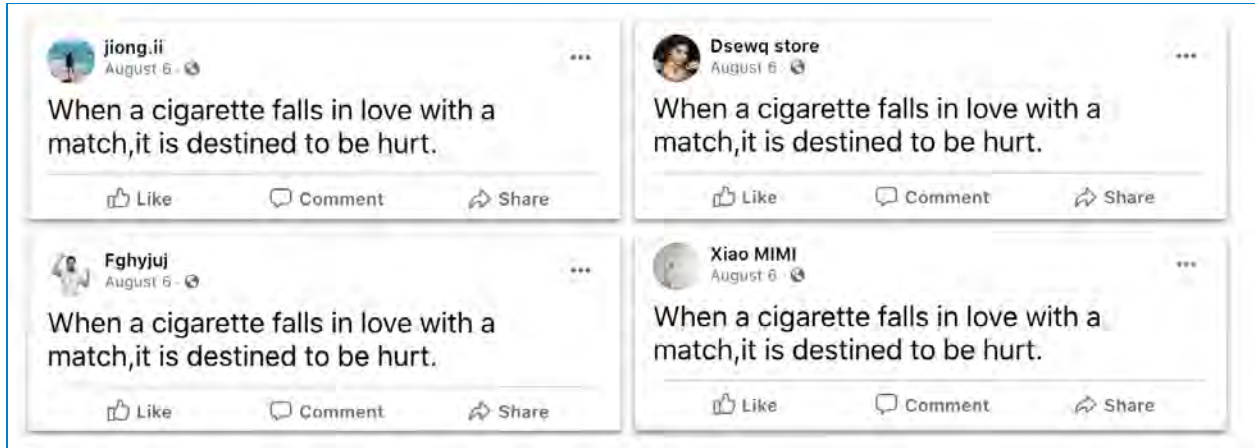
Samples of Spamouflage videos shared by the four pages in November. Note that in each case, the post points to a YouTube video that has since been suspended.

This activity generated no discernible engagement from authentic users. The pages operated in clusters that engaged with one another’s content, but did not appear to attract any engagement from elsewhere. One page would act as the originator of a given post, and all the others would share it and comment on it; then another page would take the lead, and the first originator would act as an amplifier. In effect, these clusters formed tightly-bounded bubbles in which groups of Spamouflage assets all liked, shared and replied to each other, and nobody else did.



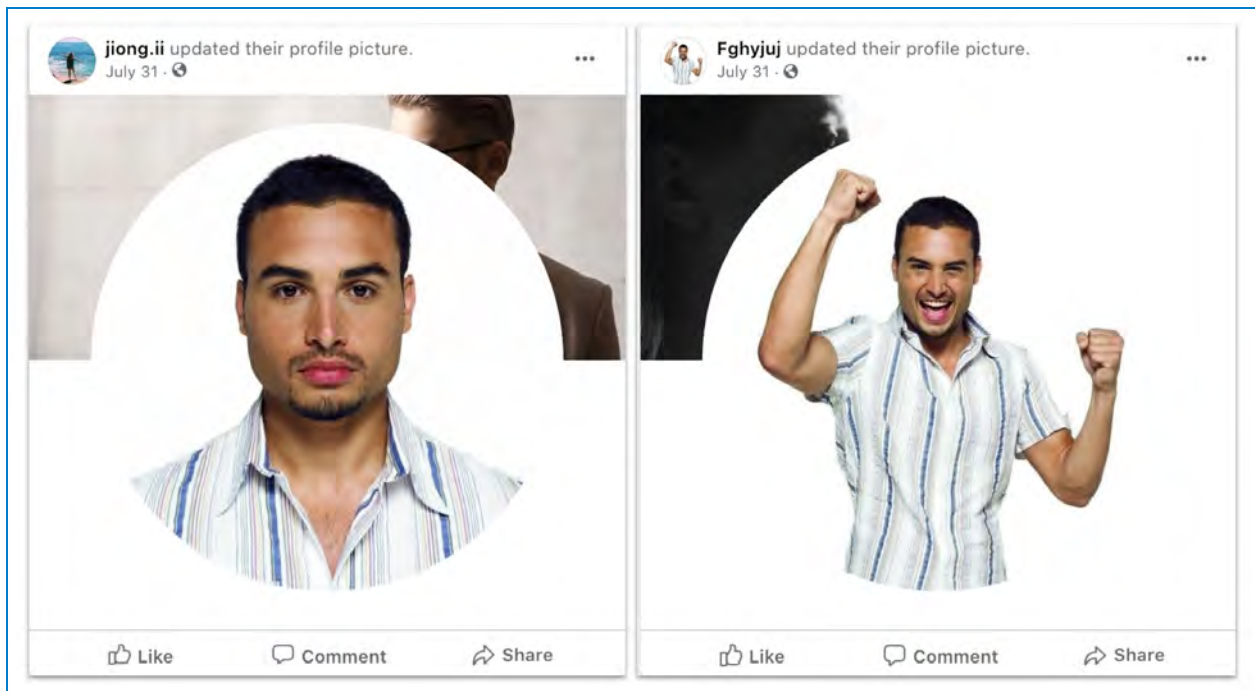
Shares of a video posted by one Spamouflage page, "Will American society continue to tear apart or reunite," by other Spamouflage pages. The original post pointed back to another Spamouflage YouTube channel which was deleted soon after.

Beyond their practice of mutually sharing each other's Spamuflage videos, the pages gave away their relationships in a number of other ways. Many of them interspersed their political posts on the Five Themes with short sayings in English or Chinese; sometimes, multiple pages posted the same saying on the same day.

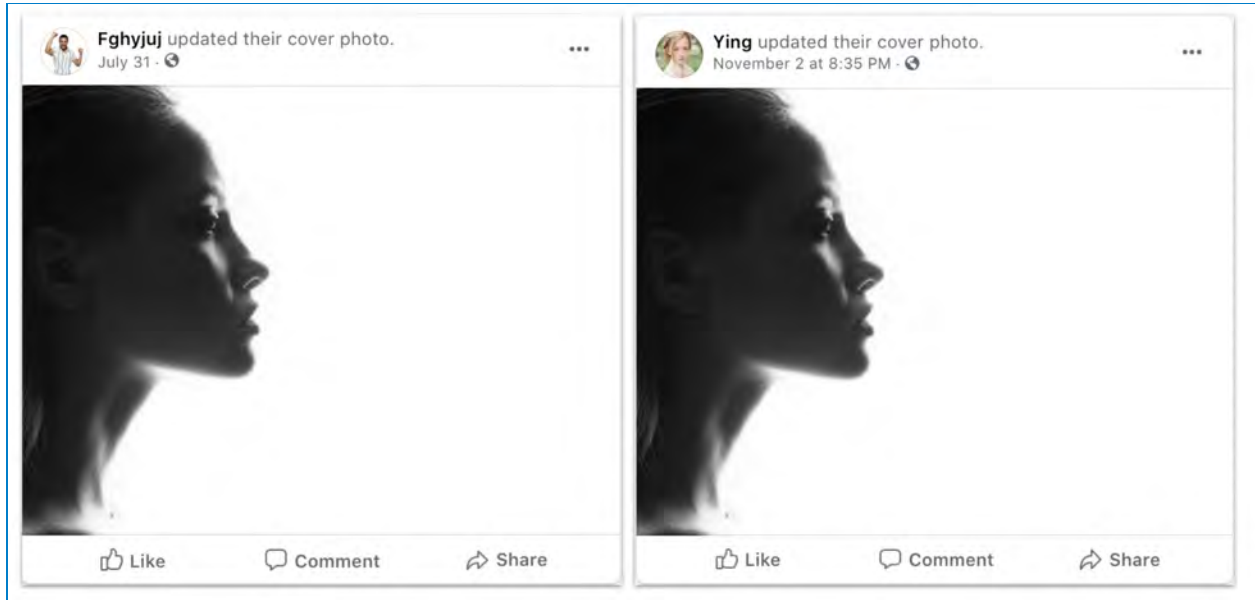


The same text with the same typo ("match,it") from four of the accounts in this cluster, August 6.

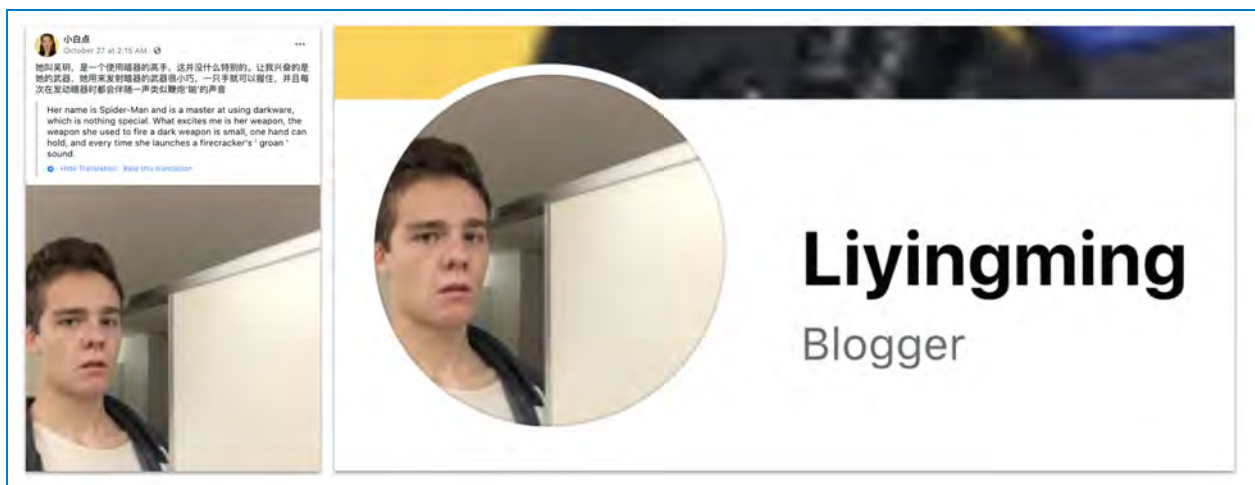
On other occasions, different assets used the same images in their profiles or posts. Sometimes, multiple pages used the same image, or images from the same source, at the same time; on other occasions, the images were reused after a period of weeks or months, suggesting that the operators behind the network had a stock of images on which to draw.



Profile picture updates by two pages in the cluster, July 31. Both shots are Getty Images portraits from the [same photographer](#).



Pictures uploaded by two pages in the cluster, July 31 and November 2.



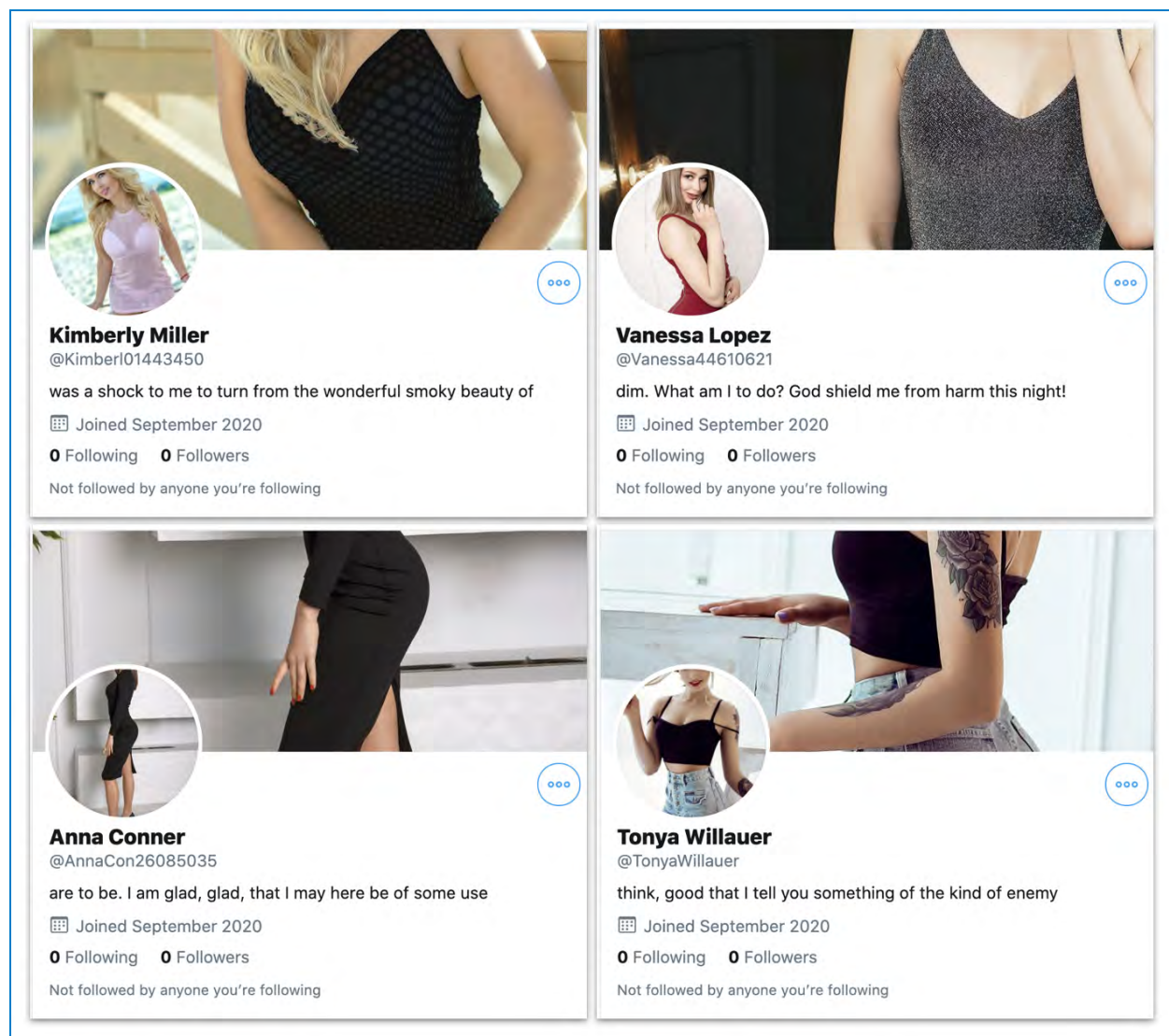
Left, portrait post by 小白点., October 27, 2020. Right, profile picture for another page in the cluster, Liyongming, one of the batch that was created on June 28 and updated its profile on August 1.

Twitter

Spamouflage's activity on Twitter showed a very similar pattern. In this case, its fake accounts did not have apparently Bangladeshi origins: instead, they typically featured profile and cover pictures of models, Western women's names, handles that featured seven letters and eight numbers, and, diagnostically, incomplete quotes from Bram Stoker's novel "Dracula." These accounts were created in batches, with bursts of creation on September 26, 2020, October 1, 2020, and November 10, 2020.⁴ Graphika has already described this sub-network in our post, "[Dracula's](#)

⁴ Twitter's user interface no longer shows the exact creation date for accounts, but it can still be accessed using online tools that access Twitter's API.

[Botnet.](#)” We have since concluded that all the bios consisted of single lines scraped from one particular edition of *Dracula*: the e-book version hand-typed by Ted and Florence Daniel of New Wave Publishers, 2103 N. Liberty Street, Portland OR 97217-4971, and published online by [Tallinn Technical University in Estonia](#). This version has a unique layout defined by justified lines that often break sentences at the beginning or end of the line into two, and the *Dracula* bios reproduce those broken lines faithfully.



*Clockwise from top left, the profiles of [Kimberly Miller](#), [Vanessa Lopez](#), [Anna Conner](#) and [Tonya Willauer](#). All were created on September 26, 2020, and [all four quoted *Dracula*](#) in their bios. Each quote, complete with broken sentences, forms a complete line in the online version of the book hosted by [Tartu University in Estonia](#).*

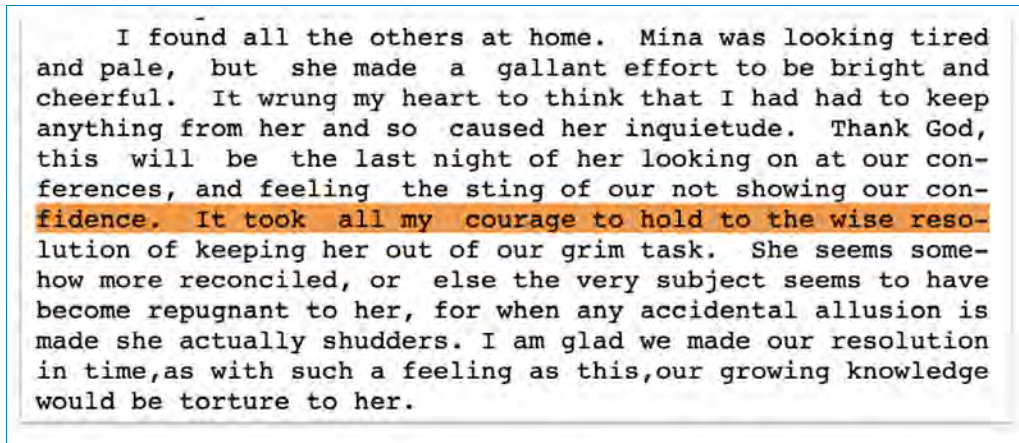
Unusually, very few of these types of accounts followed one another, or indeed any other accounts at all: their follower and following numbers usually stood at 0. The lack of mutual followings may have been designed to disguise their relationship and to make it harder for

investigators or automated systems to diagnose the sheer size of the network. However, as on Facebook, smaller clusters of accounts (typically 10-20) all retweeted and replied to each other, forming self-reinforcing bubbles. Unlike the personality accounts described above, these assets do not appear to have attracted engagement from authentic users.



Chain transmission. Top to bottom, Kimberly retweeting [Vanessa](#), Vanessa retweeting [Anna](#), Anna retweeting [Tonya](#), and Tonya retweeting [Kimberly](#). All these posts led to Spamouflage videos on YouTube.

Also as on Facebook, these accounts appear likely to have been created by a third-party vendor and sold or rented to the Spamouflage operators, rather than being created by Spamouflage itself. This can be illustrated by the fragmentary Dracula quotes. For example, several Twitter accounts that were created in October had the bio “fidence. It took all my courage to hold to the wise reso-”. This comes from Dracula, [chapter 20, page 5](#); the break in the word “confidence” at the start and “reso-” at the end matches the [electronic version](#) hosted by Tallinn Technical University.



Extract from the Tartu University version, hand-typed by Ted & Florence Daniel, New Wave Publishers, 2103 N Liberty Street, Portland OR 97217-4971. Note the line match.

While the imagery and the broken quote indicate that these assets were part of the same batch, only one, Vanessa Lopez, tweeted Spamouflage content. Another, Kelly Bell, mainly tweeted pornography, while a third, Kimberly Renick, had not tweeted at all. While it is possible that the Spamouflage network is running a side business in low-quality fake Twitter accounts, we consider it more likely that the network is renting or buying such accounts from an external provider and using them to post pro-China and anti-U.S. messaging with minimal cosmetic changes.



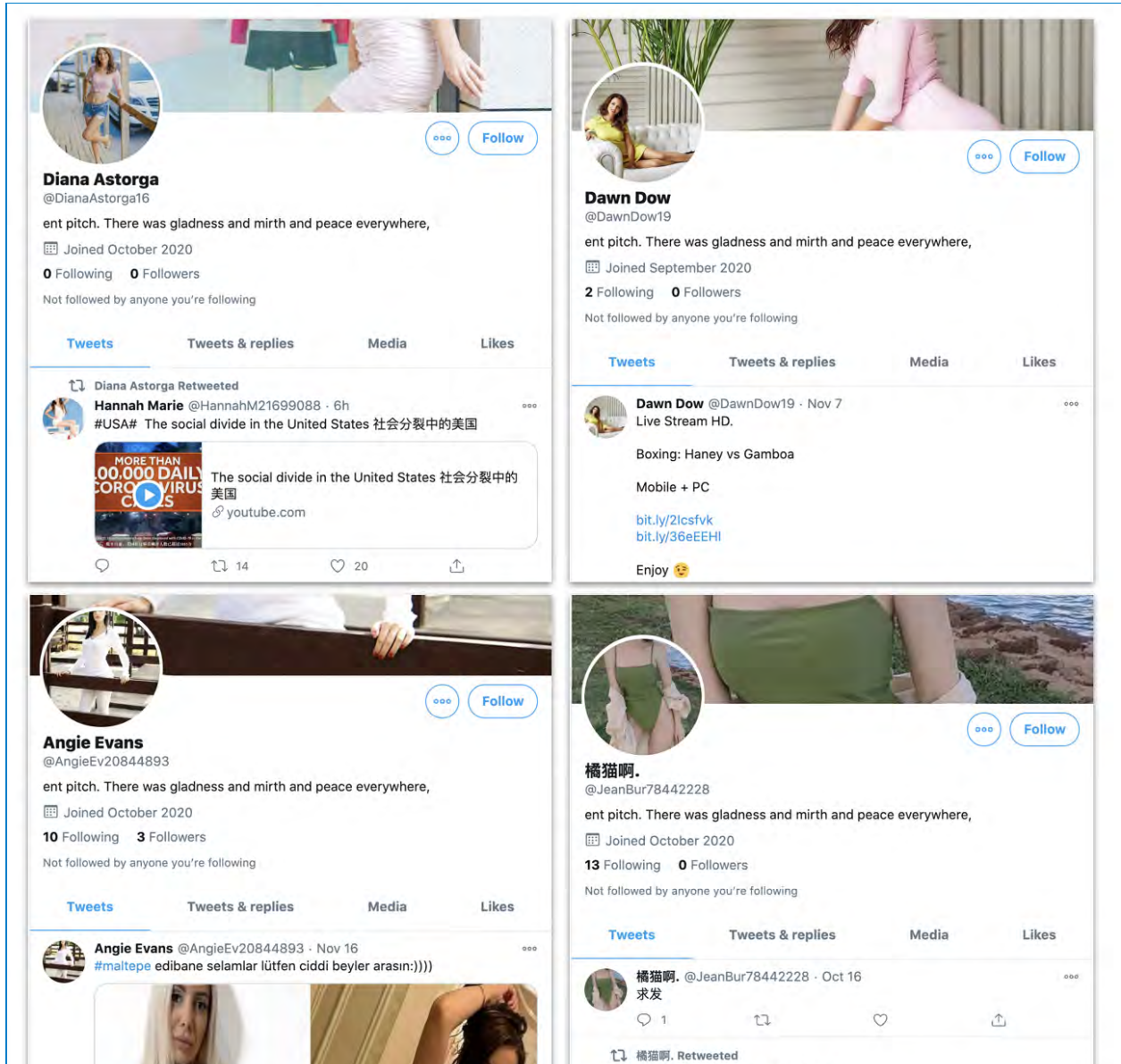
[Paula Smith](#) (Spamouflage asset, created October 21, 2020), compared with [Kelly Bell](#) (created October 20, 2020) and [Kimberly Renick](#) (created October 6, 2020).

This is by no means the only example of such activity. Another Spamouflage/Dracula bio ran, “ent pitch. There was gladness and mirth and peace everywhere.”. This, again, is a complete line in the Tallinn Technical University edition.

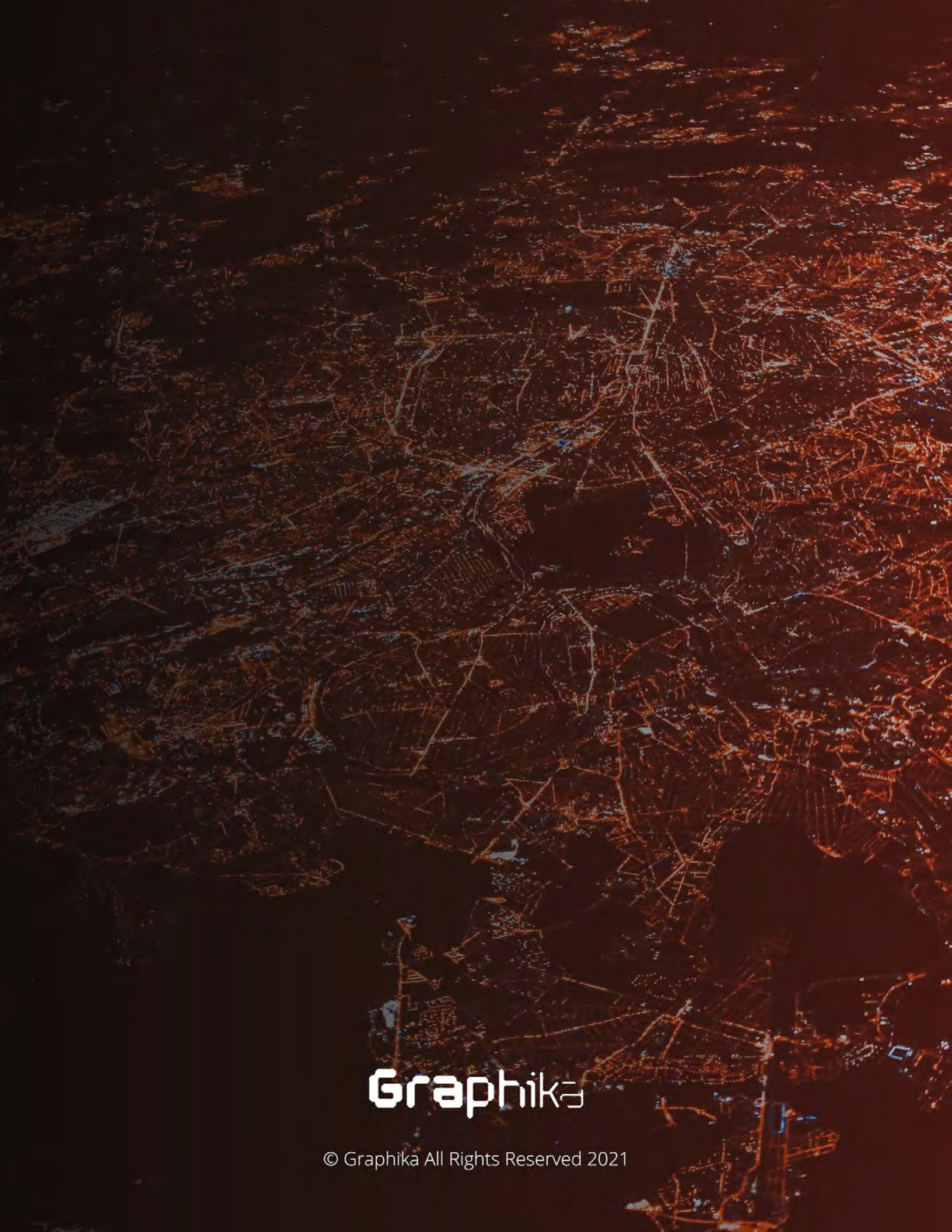
Outside the air was sweet, the sun shone, and the birds sang, and it seemed as if all nature were tuned to a different pitch. There was gladness and mirth and peace everywhere, for we were at rest ourselves on one account, and we were glad, though it was with a tempered joy.

Excerpt from the [Tallinn edition](#).

At least four different Twitter accounts that were created in September and October used this bio. One was Spamouflage amplifier Diana Astorga. The second, called Dawn Dow, only tweeted once, about a boxing match. The third, Angie Evans, offered Turkish chats, while the fourth, 橘猫啊 (originally called something like “Jean Burton” to judge by its handle, @JeanBur78442228), retweeted Chinese pornographic illustrations. Again, this suggests a third-party operation that creates batches of fake accounts and sells them on to various other users.



[Diana Astorga](#) (Spamouflage asset, created October 4, 2020), compared with [Dawn Dow](#) (one tweet about a boxing match, created September 26, 2020), [Angie Evans](#) (tweeted Turkish chat ads, created October 20, 2020), and [橘猫啊](#) (“Orange cat,” but its handle began “Jean Bur”, retweeted Chinese pornographic illustrations, created October 8, 2020).



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