

# Recent state-sponsored disinformation operations on Twitter

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TLP:WHITE

FOR INFORMATION	Category	Type	Domain	Sector	Confidence
	Cyberwar	Information operations, Disinformation	World	Social networks	A1

## Key Points

- Twitter has discovered distinct state-sponsored disinformation operations originating in China, Russia and Turkey.
- In previous months, countries such as Saudi Arabia, UAE, Egypt and Ecuador have also engaged in such campaigns.

## Summary

On June 12, Twitter disclosed<sup>1</sup> that they had found 32.242 accounts engaged in state-linked information operations. These accounts are involved in three distinct information operations, originating in China, Russia and Turkey. Twitter has permanently removed every account and piece of content associated with these operations. Twitter has attributed the respective operations as follows:

- Chinese operation: actors from **People's** Republic of China, using newly created accounts after a large takedown by Twitter in August 2019.
- Russian operation: actors affiliated with *Current Policy*, a group of social-media accounts primarily engaged in publishing pro-Kremlin, anti-opposition, and anti-Western content.
- Turkish operation: youth wing of the ruling *Justice and Development Party* (AKP).

A few days earlier, on June 8, The New York Times published their own findings<sup>2</sup> **about China's Twitter campaign**. On June 3, Twitter shared takedown datasets with the Stanford Internet Observatory<sup>3</sup> who looked at the tactics of these information operations.

The following table summarises the main facts associated with these campaigns.

Sponsoring state	Core network	Amplifier network	Purpose	Notes
China	23.750	150.000	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Spreading narratives favourable to the Communist Party of China (CCP)</li> <li>• Deceptive narratives about the political dynamics in Hong Kong</li> <li>• Four main groups of tweets: (1) the Hong Kong protests; (2) COVID-19; (3) exiled Chinese billionaire Guo Wengui; and (4) Taiwan (a smaller but still significant set).</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Tweeted 348.608 times</li> <li>• Predominantly Chinese languages</li> <li>• Core network caught early</li> <li>• Failed to achieve considerable traction</li> <li>• Amplifiers had few to no followers</li> </ul>
Russia	1.152		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Promoting the United Russia party</li> <li>• Attacking political dissidents</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Tweeted 3.434.792 times</li> <li>• Cross-posting and amplifying content</li> <li>• Operation to actors affiliated with <i>Current Policy</i>, a group of social-media accounts primarily engaged in publishing pro-Kremlin, anti-opposition, and anti-Western content.</li> </ul>
Turkey	7.340		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Amplifying political narratives favourable to the AK Parti</li> <li>• Strong support for President Erdogan</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Tweeted 36.948.524 times</li> <li>• Primarily targeted at domestic audiences within Turkey</li> <li>• Operation attributed to the youth wing of the ruling <i>Justice and Development Party</i> (AKP)</li> </ul>

<sup>1</sup> [https://blog.twitter.com/en\\_us/topics/company/2020/information-operations-june-2020.html](https://blog.twitter.com/en_us/topics/company/2020/information-operations-june-2020.html)

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/06/08/technology/china-twitter-disinformation.html>

<sup>3</sup> <https://cyber.fsi.stanford.edu/io/news/june-2020-twitter-takedown>

In previous months, Twitter and researchers had already release findings related to state sponsored operations on Twitter. The following table provides a few noteworthy examples.

Date	Sponsoring state	Target	Notes
Mar 2020	China	Italia	Chinese Twitter bots <sup>4</sup> propagated positive news about China via the hashtags #ForzaCinaeItalia (#let's go China and Italy) and #graziecina in combination with content related to COVID-19 and China.
Dec 2019	Saudi Arabia	Domestic	5.929 accounts <sup>5</sup> <b>associated with a "state-backed information operation originating in Saudi Arabia". Most involved accounts were amplifying messages favourable</b> to Saudi strategic interests in an inauthentic manner
Sept 2019	UAE, Egypt	Qatar	271 accounts <sup>6</sup> originating in the United Arab Emirates and Egypt. These accounts were interconnected in their goals and tactics: a multi-faceted information operation primarily targeting Qatar.
Sept 2019	Ecuador	Domestic	Network of 1.019 accounts in Ecuador tied to the PAIS Alliance political party.
Aug 2019	China	Hong-Kong	Network of more than 200.000 fake accounts based in the PRC which were attempting to sow discord about the protest movement in Hong Kong.

## Comments

State-sponsored campaigns on Twitter may target domestic and foreign audiences. As a common trait, the campaigns spread content favourable to the dominant political party or the government of the country of origin. They usually combined three types of accounts:

- Accounts managed by physical persons, with diverse covert identities.
- Hijacked accounts.
- Bots designed to amplify content. Despite the efforts, amplifiers regularly fail to attract a significant number of followers.

The Chinese government has made an official push onto social media such as Twitter in recent years, although this platform is blocked in China. Its diplomats are logging on to Twitter to help fight its public relations battles, developing a combative narrative, defending the regime online. Furthermore, for these operations China is likely getting support from internet marketing companies such as the Beijing-based OneSight.

The month of August 2019 marked the time that social media platforms adopted a new stance towards state-sponsored disinformation campaigns. Indeed, at that time, Twitter, Google and Facebook suspended thousands of accounts for **"coordinated inauthentic behaviour" in Hong Kong**. In addition, the three giants attributed campaign to the Chinese government.

CERT-EU has reported on state-sponsored disinformation campaigns on Twitter in TM 190827 and TM 20-037.

<sup>4</sup> <https://formiche.net/2020/03/china-unleashed-twitter-bots-covid19-propaganda-italy/>

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-twitter-saudi/twitter-suspends-accounts-linked-to-saudi-spying-case-idUSKBN1Y01JT>

<sup>6</sup> [https://blog.twitter.com/en\\_us/topics/company/2019/info-ops-disclosure-data-september-2019.html](https://blog.twitter.com/en_us/topics/company/2019/info-ops-disclosure-data-september-2019.html)