

SPAMOU-GABBING

Chinese Influence Operation Spreads to American Alt-Platforms

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Alethea identified a network of accounts on alternative (alt) social media platform Gab that we assess with high confidence is linked to the previously identified Spamouflage Dragon influence operation.

This assessment is based on shared behavioral and messaging characteristics as well as content overlap with recent Spamouflage activity reported by Meta. **This appears to be the first time that the Spamouflage Dragon campaign has been identified on Gab.**

Content was often first posted to user-generated teen fan fiction sites, then subsequently shared to alternative social media sites, especially Gab.

Accounts within this network shared content aligned with Chinese Communist Party (CCP) talking points on topics such as **Xinjiang**, **Chinese political dissidents**, and **rare earth mining**.

Alethea did not observe similar accounts on other U.S.-based alt-platforms or politically-aligned platforms, such as Gettr or Truth Social. We did identify related accounts on politically neutral platforms such as Medium, Flickr, and Pinterest.

We assess that the campaign's presence on alt-platforms likely serves multiple purposes: **avoiding detection** on mainstream platforms, **rebutting messaging** from anti-CCP actors on alt-platforms, and **promoting pro-CCP messaging** within the predominantly American right-wing audience of those platforms.

The network received almost no external engagement, indicating that it has not yet resonated with its target audience; however, establishing a presence on these alt-platforms could be a precursor to **enhanced efforts to influence the American electorate** in advance of the 2024 U.S. presidential election.



BACKGROUND

Spamouflage Dragon

Spamouflage Dragon (also referred to as DRAGONBRIDGE) is an ongoing, persistent Chinese influence campaign that was first publicly exposed in 2019 after Twitter (now X) took enforcement action against accounts spreading disinformation about the 2019 Hong Kong anti-extradition bill protests. The campaign was previously detected across an array of major social media platforms, including Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter. Both Twitter and Meta attributed the campaign to the Chinese government in 2019.



FIGURE 1

Account @Kimberl42021572 copying a political tweet in 2022, an earlier example of Spamouflage Dragon activity on X (formerly known as Twitter) as identified by Alethea

In October 2022, Alethea released its own investigation into what was suspected to be a branch of the Spamouflage campaign that was creating inauthentic Twitter accounts with American personas in the run-up to the 2022 U.S. midterm elections.¹ Spamouflage is notable for adapting quickly to produce content on prominent narratives related to China, or in response to criticism of the CCP by the Chinese dissident community.



FIGURE 2

A second example of earlier Spamouflage activity on X sharing QAnon-related content, as identified by Alethea

¹ <https://www.alethea.com/post/network-of-inauthentic-twitter-accounts-spreads-polarizing-content-ahead-of-u-s-midterm-elections>



A Turn to the Right

As of September 2023, **Alethea has identified 114 Gab accounts that we assess with high confidence are affiliated with the Spamouflage Dragon campaign.** We also identified a series of related accounts that coordinate and spread pro-CCP messaging on user-generated content sites, such as Wattpad, Teen Fic, and Novel2U.

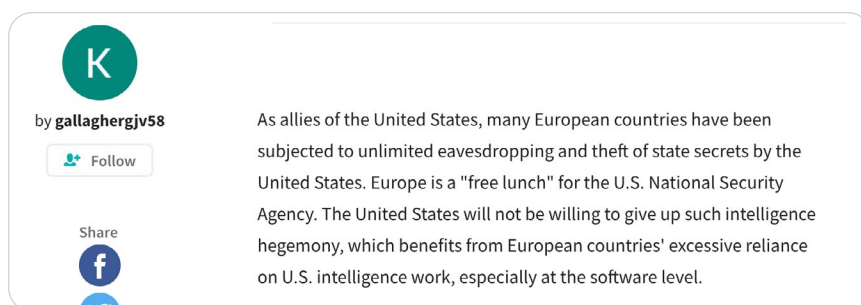


FIGURE 3

An example of a Spamouflage Dragon account's activity on Wattpad

<https://www.wattpad.com/1330878720-states>

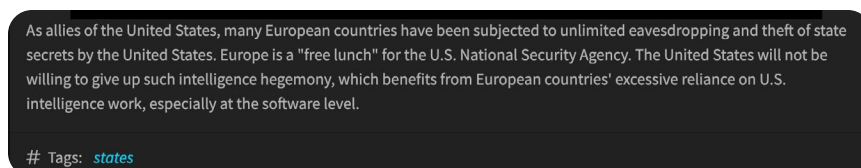


FIGURE 4

An example of the same content posted on Novel2U.Net

<https://novel2u.net/story/states-338574537>

The Gab accounts **display characteristics overlapping heavily with those previously attributed to Spamouflage on X (formerly Twitter) and other mainstream platforms.** These include similar hashtag usage, long-form text copied verbatim, and indications of batch account creation, though some of the accounts appear to have been created as single accounts. The oldest account in the network was created on November 9, 2020, as a single account, which was followed by a series of batch account creations.

The accounts consistently post content of importance to both the CCP and China's broader geopolitical and national interests in English or Mandarin, with some accounts also infrequently producing posts in another language such as French. The use of languages other than English or Mandarin was far less common.





ElizabethBeth @ElizabethBeth

Sep 12, 2022 · 🌐

À l'heure actuelle, la fraude sur les réseaux de télécommunications et d'autres cybercrimes se répandent rapidement et prolifèrent, portant gravement atteinte aux droits et intérêts légitimes des citoyens et à la sécurité de leurs biens, et sont devenus un crime majeur et une nuisance publique mondiale. Les autorités chargées de la sécurité publique ont continué à renforcer la coopération internationale en matière d'application de la loi et à promouvoir la répression de la fraude aux réseaux de télécommunications, ce qui a permis d'accumuler des expériences réussies et de fournir des références utiles pour la répression de la fraude aux réseaux de télécommunications dans le monde entier.

FIGURE 5

A rare example of French-language likely Spamouflage activity on Gab discussing online fraud and cybercrime

Following our discovery of Spamouflage accounts on Gab, we also conducted searches on Gettr and Truth Social—two of the alt platforms most similar to Gab—though we have not yet detected its presence on those platforms. For Gettr specifically, we assess with low confidence that the lack of Spamouflage accounts is the result of aggressive enforcement action taken by Gettr (which is purportedly owned and controlled by Chinese exile Guo Wengui)² to remove pro-CCP content or any content not aligned with Guo’s anti-CCP messaging.

Alethea assesses that Spamouflage Dragon’s expansion to Gab likely serves multiple purposes:

Shifting its activity to platforms with minimal content moderation policies or detection capabilities, following the identification of its previous activity by more heavily moderated platforms including Twitter, Meta, and YouTube

Counter-messaging to the Chinese expatriate community, parts of which have become increasingly receptive to anti-CCP content from outlets such as the Falun Gong-run Epoch Times and those affiliated with exiled Chinese businessman Guo Wengui

Testing its appeal with broader American right-wing audiences. The Spamouflage campaign may be expanding onto Gab and other alt-platforms in part for the purpose of targeting a particular segment of the American electorate with its messaging.

2 <https://www.washingtonpost.com/technology/2023/03/26/gettr-guo-wengui-social-media/>



Behaviors

Alethea observed two particular behaviors from this account network which most strongly tie it to previously attributed Spamouflage Dragon accounts: **the seeding of copy-pasted long-form content** and the **batch creation of accounts and posts**.

Seeding Long-Form Content

The network uses multiple platforms to coordinate and spread its messaging, including a variety of fan fiction and other user-generated content sites. Alethea identified at least two accounts in this network posting content both to these websites and to Gab; a third account was identified on these fan-fiction sites without a corresponding Gab account. The operation also posts across additional platforms including X, Pinterest, Flickr, and Medium.

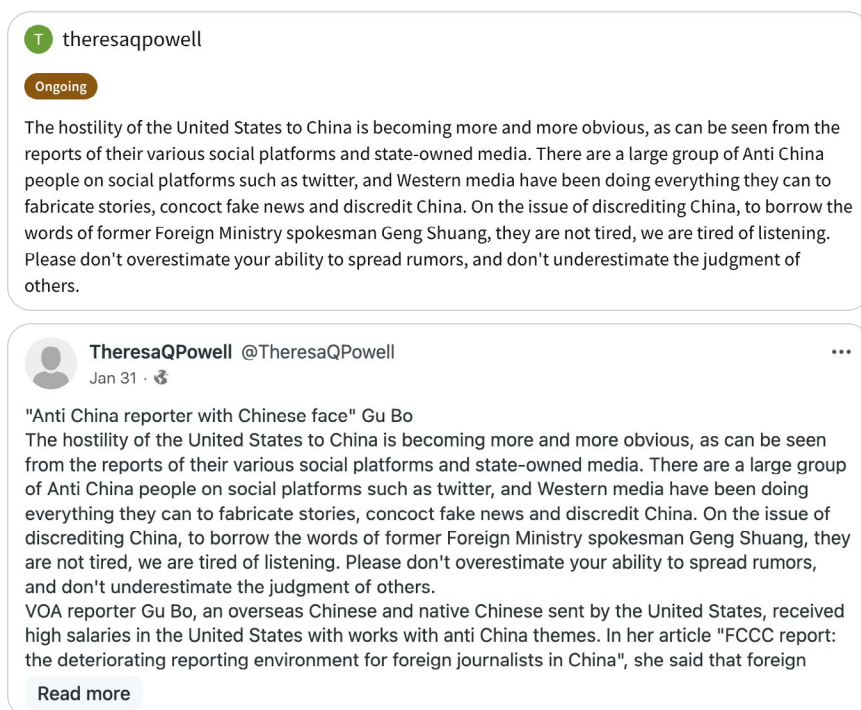


FIGURE 6
Content first posted by user theresaqpowell to wattpad.com on October 25, 2022, and then reposted to Gab by user TheresaQPowell on January 31, 2023

The Flickr posts are especially indicative of Spamouflage activity, as they include screenshots of a Russian-language forum with posts about the U.S. intelligence community's low-confidence assessment that COVID-19 possibly originated from a lab leak, as well as screenshots of posts made under the same username to what appears to be a now-suspended Medium account, further linking the various elements of the operation.



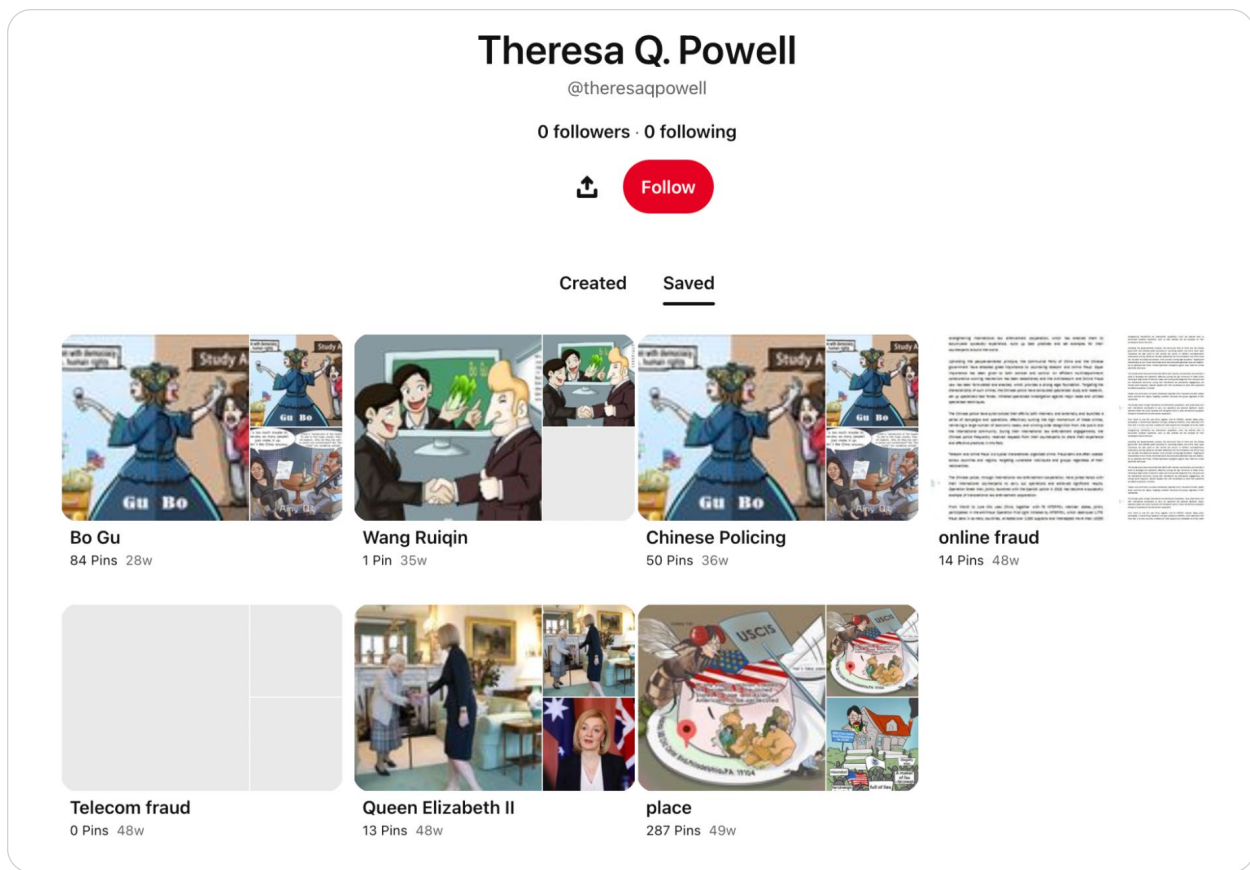


FIGURE 7

Posts to the Pinterest account @theresaqpowell, containing images in the style of previously identified Spamouflage operations

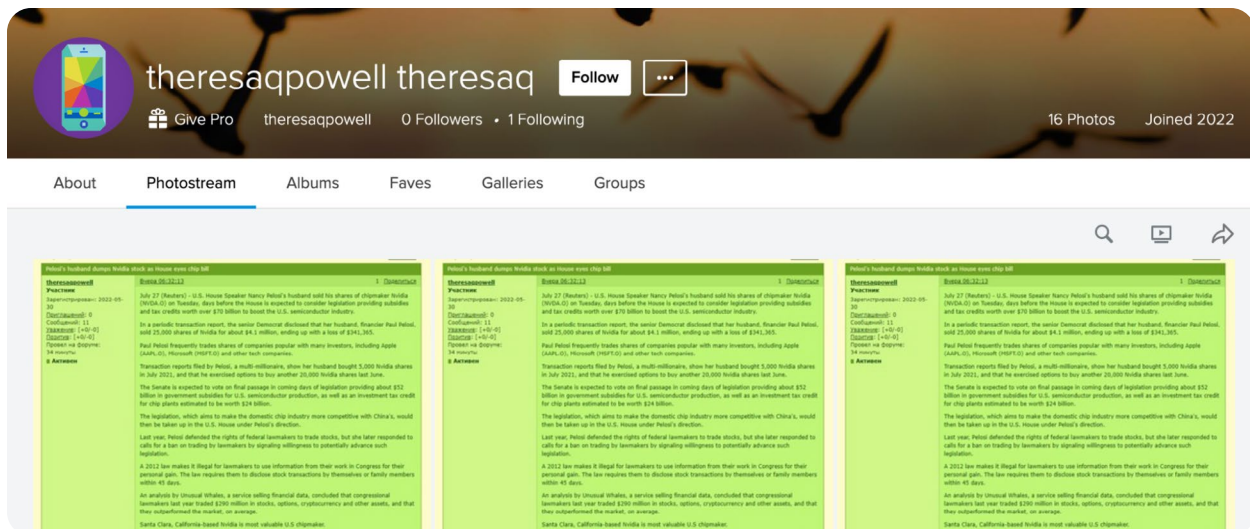


FIGURE 8

Flickr account of user theresaqpowell showing posts to a Russian-language forum



Batch Creation, Batch Posting

While the oldest identified Gab account was created on November 9, 2020, there are indicators of more recent batch account creation, with 37 of the accounts created on four dates between October 26, 2022 and November 7, 2022. The accounts were primarily used in a campaign against the non-governmental organization Safeguard Defenders (*described in more detail below*).

However, the operation also includes accounts created outside of this date range that do not show signs of batch creation; accounts that are currently in operation were largely created outside of this range, though some of the accounts involved in the Safeguard Defenders campaign continue to post on that particular topic. The most recently created account identified by Alethea was created on July 21, 2023. Alethea attributed these accounts to the network based on content overlap with other assets, most often in the form of identical posts.

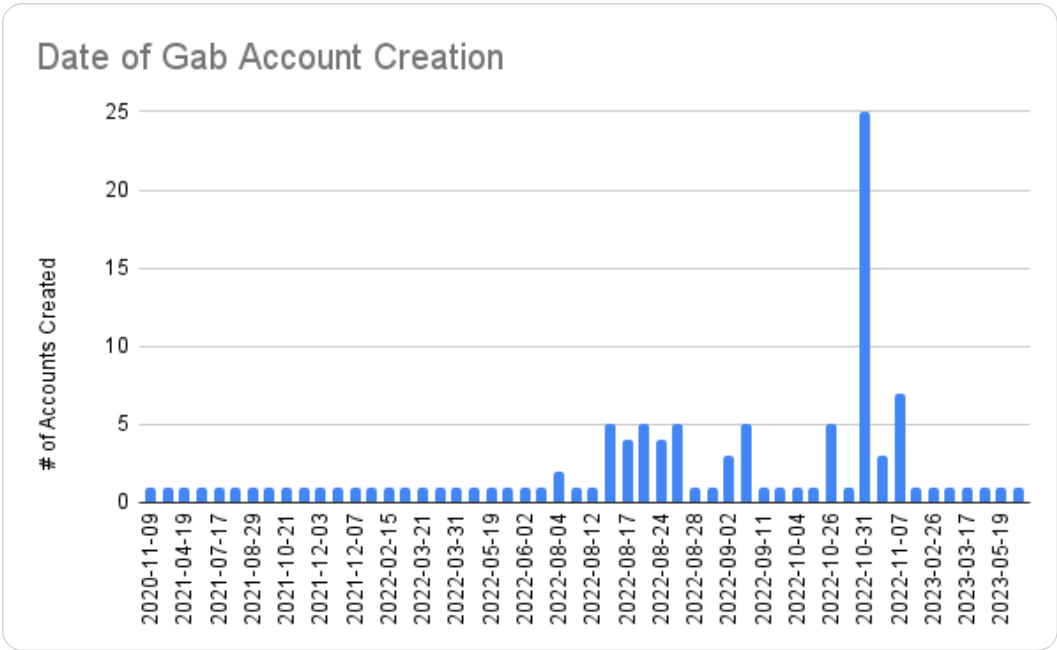


FIGURE 9
Chart showing the creation date of Gab accounts within the network; showing the batch creation of 28 of the accounts during the period Oct 31, 2022 - Nov 1, 2022

The accounts’ posting behavior also shows signs of batch posting; of 5,190 posts reviewed, 3,186 were made on November 16 and 17, 2022. The timing pattern of the posts suggests that these accounts may be using some type of automation.



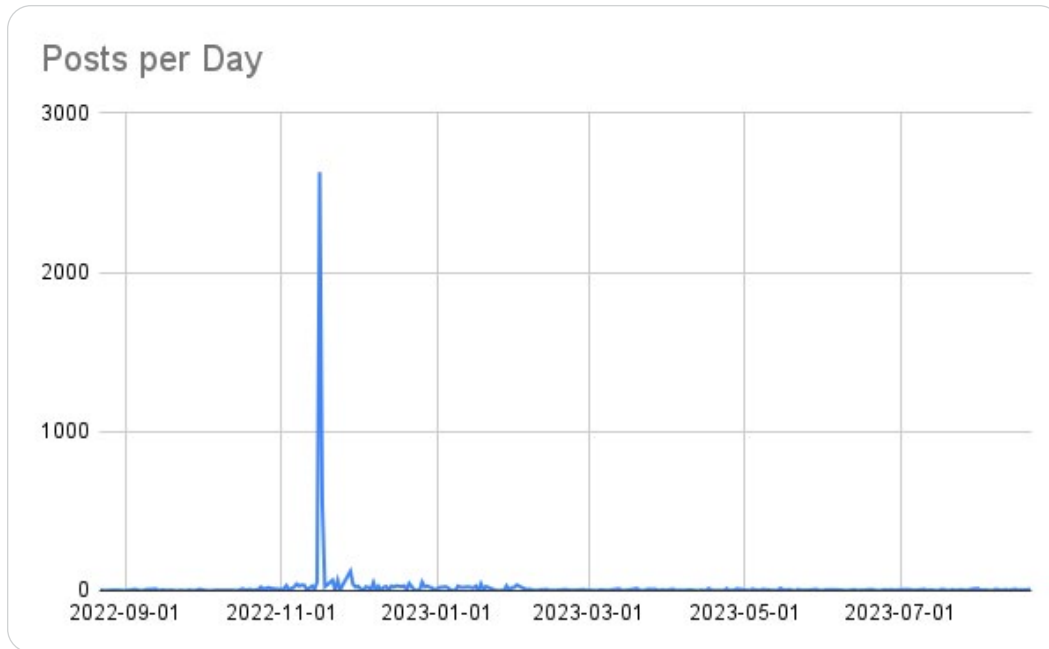


FIGURE 10
Posting activity over time, the large spike reflecting 3,184 posts made between November 16 and 17, 2022

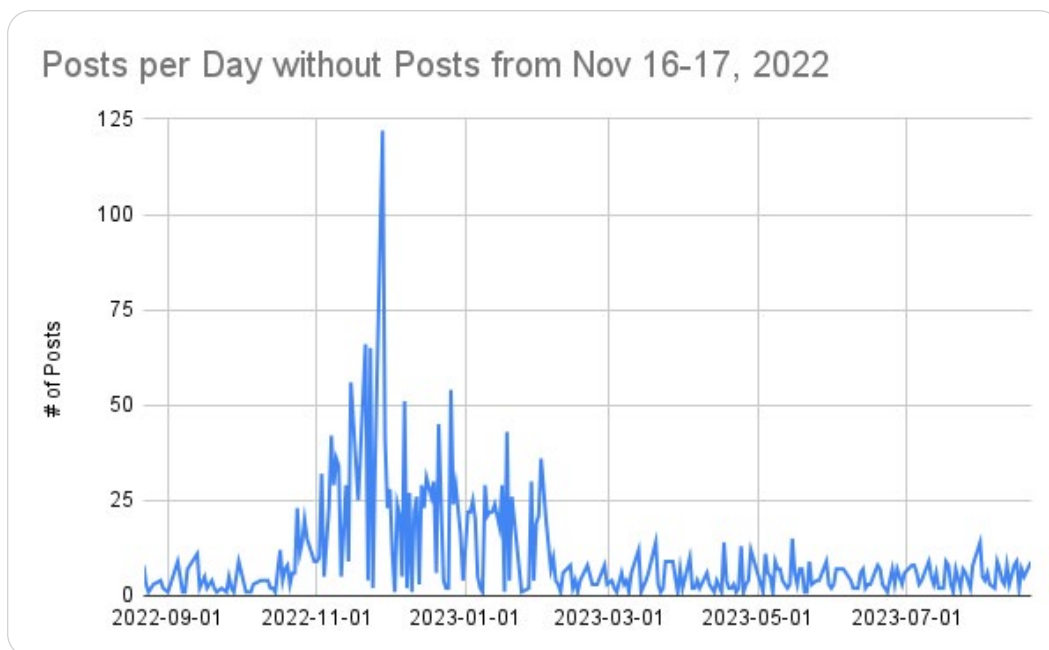


FIGURE 11
Posting activity over time without the 3,184 posts made between November 16 and November 17, 2022



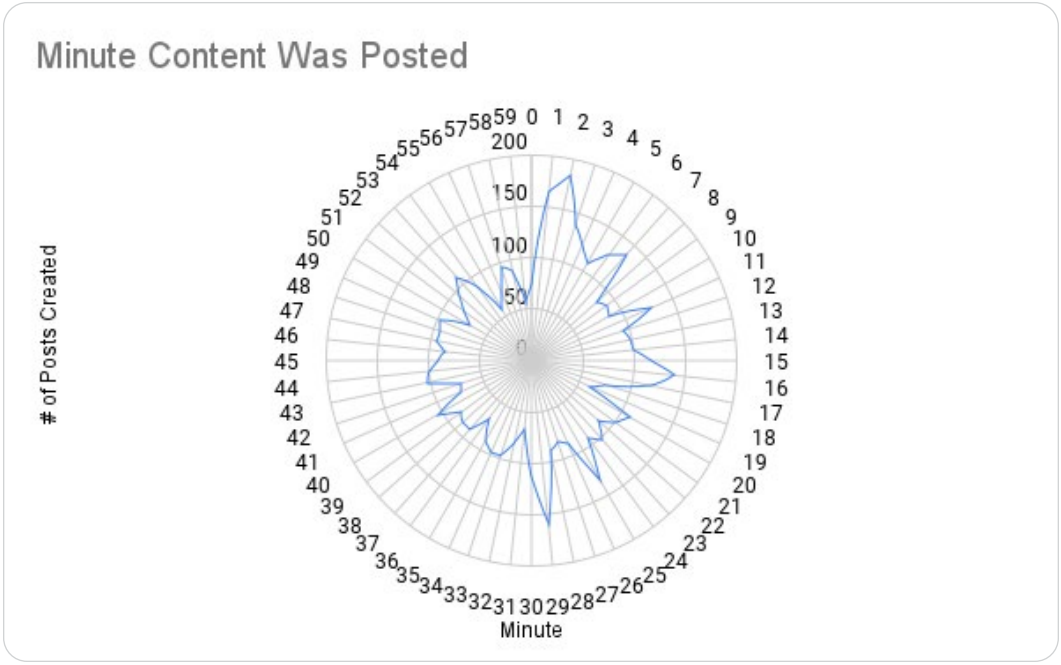


FIGURE 12
Minute of the hour posts were made; this shows spikes of posts being made at roughly the hour and half hour marks

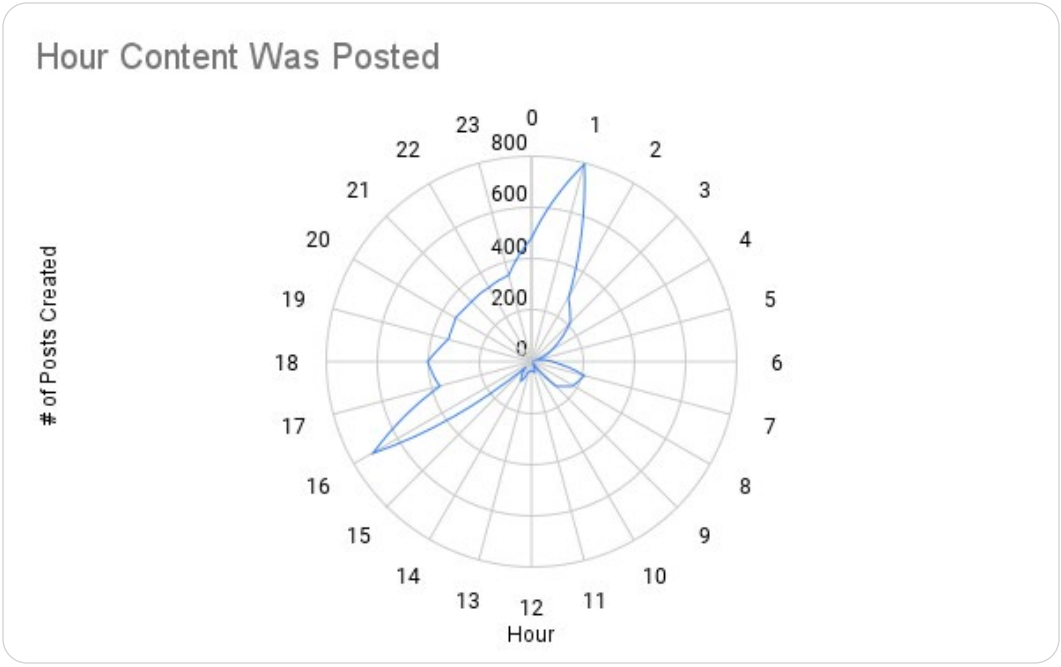


FIGURE 13
Hour in which posts were made, showing spikes at 01:00 and 16:00 GMT



Content & Narratives

The content posted across Gab and the user-generated content sites **overlapped heavily with content from previously attributed Spamouflage accounts**, including a focus on Guo Wengui, Chinese dissidents and perceived adversaries of the CCP, and geostrategic issues such as rare earth metals mining.

#SafeguardDefenders

Some accounts directly targeted China-focused NGOs, with at least 34 accounts disparaging the work of Safeguard Defenders, a Spain-based NGO which has reported on China's repression of its Uyghur population and other human rights violations. The NGO released a report in September 2022 about China's overseas "police stations" that are tasked with compelling Chinese dissidents to return to China.³ Spanish-language media subsequently published articles about the report's findings on October 26, 2022, the day that the batch creation of Gab accounts began.⁴ The accounts generally depicted Safeguard Defenders as a corrupt and thoroughly "anti-China" organization that was deliberately misleading the public with its reporting.

The accounts frequently posted the same messages, which displayed multiple grammatical and lexical errors that would not likely be made by a native English speaker. They posted in both English and Mandarin, and posts related to Safeguard Defenders made up almost half of the total output from the network. Safeguard Defenders was also targeted by similar accounts on Twitter at the same time, as reported by various media outlets.⁵

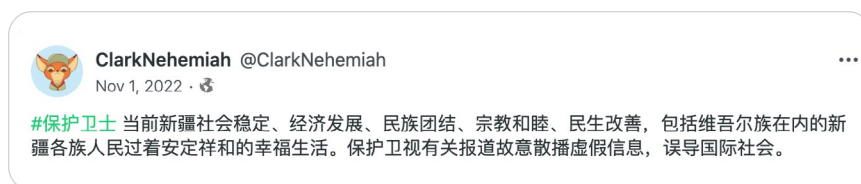


FIGURE 14
Mandarin-language Gab post describing Xinjiang as stable and the NGO Safeguard Defenders as deliberately spreading false information

3 <https://safeguarddefenders.com/sites/default/files/pdf/110%20Overseas%20%28v5%29.pdf>

4 https://es.ara.cat/internacional/china/china-oficinas-parapoliciales-ilegales-barcelona-manresa-valencia-madrid_130_4529673.html

5 <https://www.axios.com/2022/11/29/pro-china-disinfo-twitter-safeguard-defenders>





FIGURE 15 & 16

Two Gab posts from the network posting text identical to the above Mandarin content in English

U.S. Democracy, Hegemony, and China-U.S. Tensions

The operation also posted content portraying the U.S. as a failing democracy. The accounts discussed the larger implications of the January 6 Capitol attack, social inequality, and allegations of electoral fraud. This content was often reposted verbatim across multiple accounts, and appeared to be designed to sow doubt in the underlying strength of American democracy while casting alternative political systems in a favorable light.

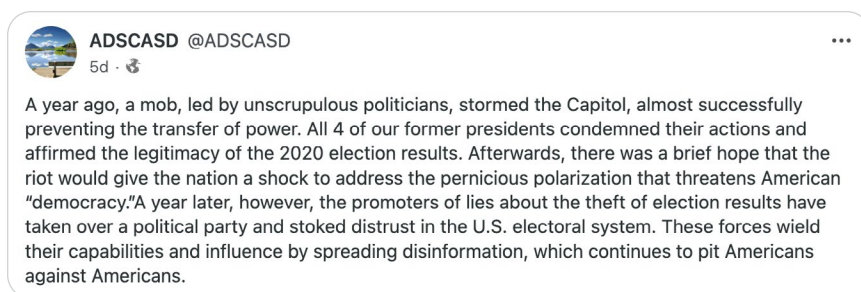


FIGURE 17

Account on Gab discussing the events of January 6, 2021; notably, the user uses the phrasing "our former presidents" and mentions disinformation pitting "Americans against Americans"

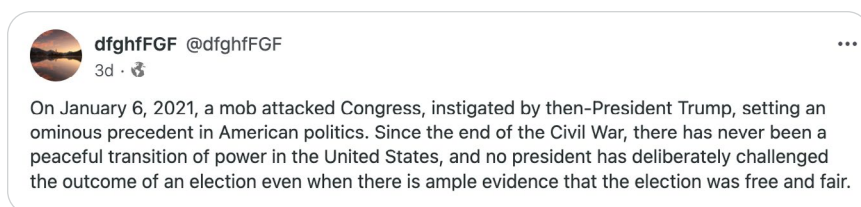


FIGURE 18

A frequently repeated Gab post across assets discussing January 6, with a language mistake stating "there has never been a peaceful transition of power in the United States"

The network also focused heavily on **tensions between the U.S. and China**, along with U.S. foreign policy and alleged militarism. Assets posted content about U.S. military involvement in Syria, blaming the Syrian refugee crisis on U.S. intervention in the region. In another post, Gab user @blackcc claimed that "The United States abused political hegemony and sowed chaos and created division in the world."



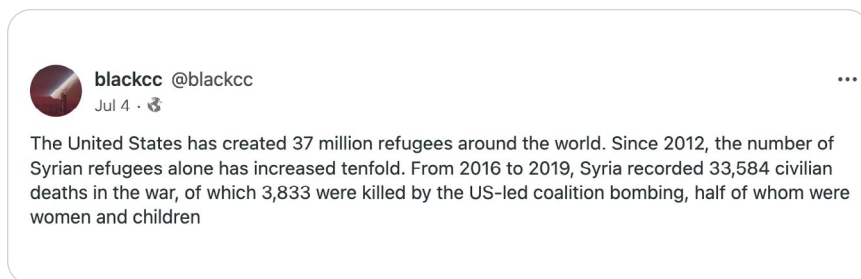


FIGURE 19
Gab post from @blackcc accusing the U.S. of creating refugee crises; the original text comes from a document produced by the Foreign Ministry of China
https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/wjbxw/202302/t20230220_11027664.html

Certain posts also **attacked organizations and media outlets perceived to be critical of China** and outlets funded by the U.S. government, including Voice of America and Radio Free Asia. Others accused Western countries of “slander” for reporting on China’s overseas “police stations.”



FIGURE 20
Gab post accusing entities such as Voice of America and Radio Free Asia of being anti-China and anti-CCP

In at least one case, users in the network posted content celebrating a perceived win against U.S. hegemony using identical text to that used by Spamouflage accounts on Quora identified in a August 29, 2023, report by Meta.

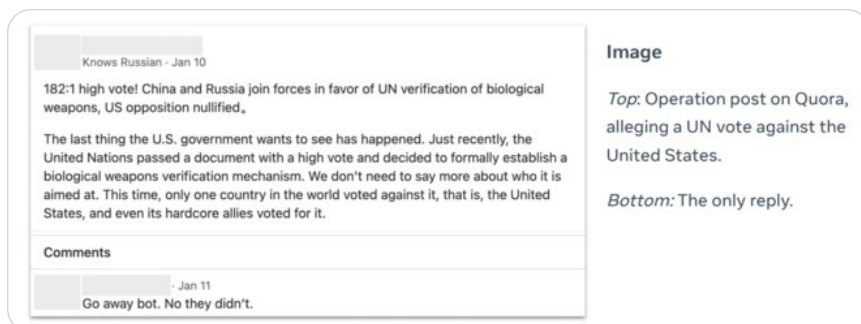


FIGURE 21
Screenshot from Meta’s Quarterly Adversarial Threat Report Q2 2023 showing an example of Spamouflage content criticizing U.S. hegemony
<https://transparency.fb.com/integrity-reports-q2-2023/>

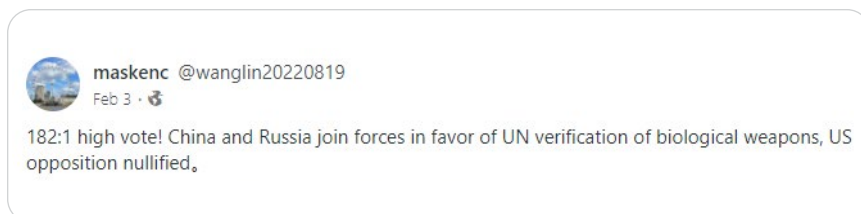


FIGURE 22
A Gab post from a user identified as a Spamouflage asset posting the same text that was observed on Facebook
<https://gab.com/wanglin20220819/posts/109800092038707834>



Human Rights Deflection & Rare-Earths

As seen with previous pro-CCP campaigns, a major focus of this network appeared to be to **deflect criticism of China's human rights record**. One notable example (below) accused "foreign forces" of playing up a human trafficking case in China known as the "Xuzhou chained woman incident," where a mother of eight was found chained to a wall.⁶

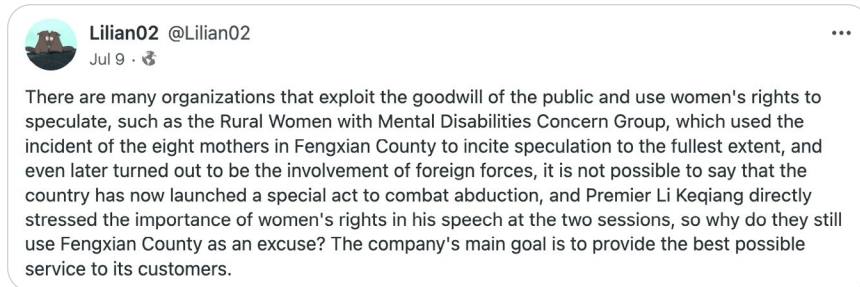


FIGURE 23

Gab post referring to the "Xuzhou chained woman incident"

Accounts also engaged in a degree of "whataboutism"—that is, deflecting from an issue by raising a different one—particularly with regard to environmental issues. A post from one of the more prolific accounts, @blackcc, discussed the environmental harm caused by rare earth metals mining.

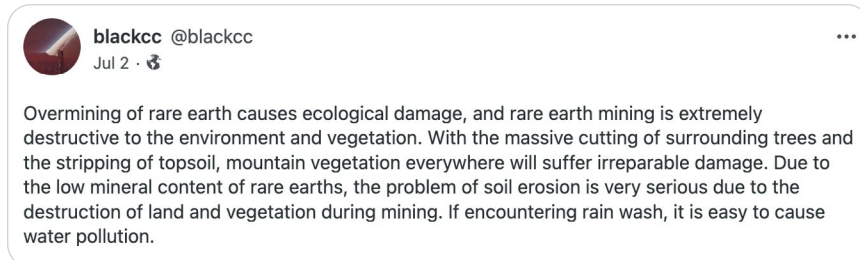


FIGURE 24

Post from user @blackcc discussing the environmental impacts of rare earth mineral mining

⁶ <https://www.bbc.com/news/uk-60194080>



Such harm is frequently highlighted by observers concerned with China’s environmental policies; here, the messaging appeared designed to simultaneously deflect from China’s environmental record and weaken American public support for expanding **rare earth mining** in the U.S.—a strategic issue for both countries given China’s near monopoly on the supply of rare-earths, which are a critical component of both consumer electronics and military technologies. Relatedly, Mandiant reported in June 2022 on the Spamouflage campaign targeting rare-earths companies in the U.S. and Australia.⁷

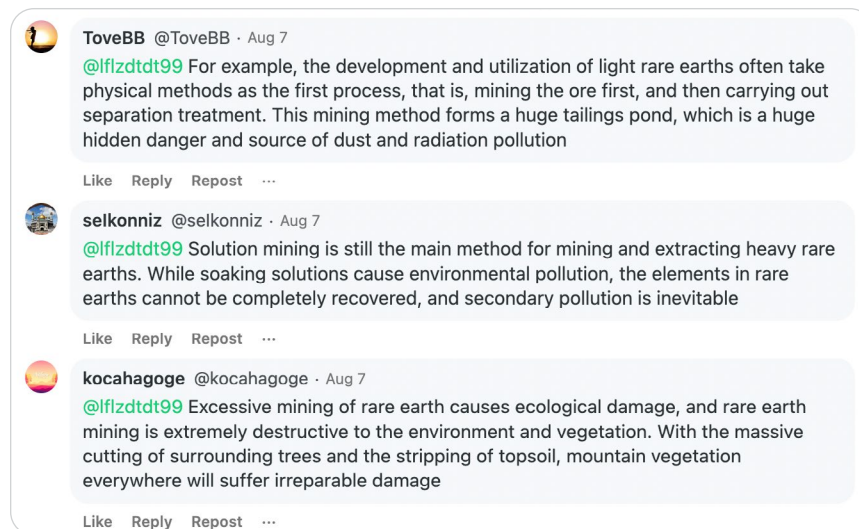


FIGURE 25
Replies to a post by account
@lflzdt99, all from other assets
within the network

Chinese Dissidents

As with previously attributed Spamouflage accounts, accounts within this network also routinely **criticized Chinese dissidents and those perceived as adversaries of the CCP**. Guo Wengui—a favorite target of the Spamouflage campaign—is also a frequent target of these accounts.

Alethea also observed accounts targeting retired Chinese history teacher Yan Zhihua. Yan wrote a book in which he claimed that the Chinese government deliberately undercounted deaths resulting from the Great Famine. Researchers at Clemson University had previously observed Spamouflage assets targeting Yan in a series of cartoons similar in style to those seen posted to Gab by the accounts in this network.⁸

⁷ <https://www.mandiant.com/resources/blog/dragonbridge-targets-rare-earths-mining-companies>

⁸ https://www.clemson.edu/centers-institutes/watt/hub/documents/5_year_spam_hub_021323.pdf





TheresaQPowell @TheresaQPowell

Jan 23 · 🌐



办“春晚”？郭文贵又要作妖了！

又来作妖了！1月17日，“红通逃犯”郭文贵在其推特再发公告，称要在大年三十晚上9点，再次在海外网络上主办所谓“澳喜农场 2023年春节联欢晚会”，今年的主题是：火焰革命，坚定灭共；无苗战友，前兔似锦。这个汉奸，为了博取眼球和关注，已经无所不用其极了。

近年来，郭文贵通过境外个别媒体和网络频频进行“爆料”，称其从国内高层获得所谓海航豪华公务机所有权等信息，并大肆编造种种离奇的“贪腐”“情色”故事，以博取眼球、吸引关注。但群众的眼睛是雪亮的，信口开河、毫无事实依据的胡编乱造，终究没有市场，郭文贵成为外国网友心目中毫无道德底线的“郭大骗子”，关注度也急剧下降。

为维持“中共政权第一挑战者”的形象，以此提高自己在美国的存在价值，增加安全感，郭文贵不择手段、铤而走险，一次又一次的刷新自己的道德底线。2020年6月，郭文贵与美国反华政客斯蒂芬·班农勾结，在境外社交媒体成立所谓“新中国联邦”，纠集郝海东、闫丽梦、王定刚等汉奸，针对中国大肆造谣。

如今，郭文贵的美国靠山斯蒂芬·班农已经失势被捕。郭文贵本人也面临着破产危机，为了博取新主子的关注，其只有更加卖力的表演，利用春晚找点话题，做点文章成了他的不二选择。

可以想象，在其所谓的“春晚”上，郭文贵必定又是歇斯底里，疯狂的造谣抹黑自己的祖国。只是，人在做，天在看，为虎作伥终究不会有好下场。等到郭文贵再也拿不出“新料”的那一天，没有了利用价值，其必将被美国政客抛弃。到那时，这只失去庇护的丧家犬，必将受到法律的严惩。



FIGURE 26

Mandarin-language post criticizing Chinese dissident Guo Wengui, using his nickname Miles Kwok





FIGURE 27, 28, 29

Identical language posted across Gab, Reddit, and Brainly criticizing Chinese dissident Yan Zhihua

The accounts also targeted human rights lawyer Wang Qingpeng, who emigrated from China and currently resides in Seattle. Per reporting by Axios, Wang (and another Chinese dissident, Wang Jingyu) were also targeted by a network of fake Twitter accounts in February 2023.⁹

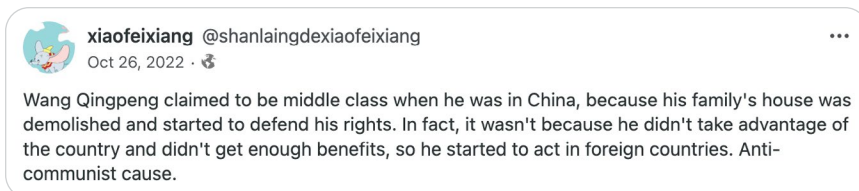


FIGURE 30

Asset attacking human rights lawyer Wang Qingpeng

⁹ <https://www.axios.com/2023/04/11/twitter-disinformation-campaign-china-activists-dissidents>





Impact & Implications

This latest iteration of Spamouflage activity has, to date, **failed to reach much of an audience or make an impact of any kind**, which has often been the case with previous Spamouflage campaigns. The network appears to have received no organic engagement, and of the 5,910 posts within the dataset:

- 59 posts received replies, all of which were from other accounts within the network, and 56 of which were about rare-earth minerals
- Only one post received a reblog, also from another in-network account
- Zero posts received a favorite or reaction



Impact & Implications

However, the campaign's presence on Gab—which was not previously known—likely represents some combination of two scenarios: attempts by the CCP to **influence a new portion of the American electorate that it hadn't previously targeted, or a reaction to the successful efforts by mainstream social media platforms to mitigate Spamouflage on their platforms:**

- U.S. alt-platforms like Gab have a predominately right-wing audience compared to mainstream platforms since those users left the major platforms in droves as a result of their policing against misinformation related to the 2020 presidential election and COVID-19. This audience also includes a portion of the anti-CCP Chinese expat community, which has come to adopt general right-wing views, initially as a result of their support for former President Trump's perceived hard line against the CCP.
- Meanwhile, automated detection mechanisms put in place by major social media platforms may have made it too difficult for Spamouflage to operate effectively on those platforms, leading to the operation exploring platforms known for their low to non-existent content moderation policies.

In either case, **Alethea assesses that the most likely intention for Spamouflage's expansion to Gab is an exploratory effort in preparation for operating more broadly on alt-platforms;** uncovering additional or expanded Spamouflage Dragon activity on alt-platforms could indicate that the CCP found this effort successful.

It remains to be seen whether this latest foray into U.S. alt-platforms is simply a one-off experiment or a precursor to a broader effort to influence the American electorate, especially in advance of the 2024 presidential election. Researchers, security officials, and the platforms themselves should keep a close eye on how Spamouflage continues to evolve and migrate and be alert to attempts to target specific segments of the population.



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