

Troll Network Spreading False Information Targeting U.S. Election May Be Linked to Steve Bannon and Guo Wengui



Alethea Group identified a large network of social media accounts we assess may be linked to Chinese billionaire Guo Wengui and Steve Bannon, as described in a recent [New York Times article](#). We discovered these accounts operating on mainstream social media platforms, such as YouTube, Twitter, Instagram, and Reddit, but also on fringe platforms that promote themselves as platforms for the right, such as Gab and Parler. We also found one post from this network on Russia's VK and another on China's Weibo. Altogether, we identified hundreds of accounts across platforms, as well as more than a dozen regionally focused Discord servers and WhatsApp channels in which this network coordinates and plans its activities. These accounts have actively posted content aimed at the US election, including posting false or misleading content about voting, amplifying known right-wing public figures, and targeting key Twitter accounts they identified in swing states with their content.

The scale at which this network is operating on fringe social media platforms, such as Gab and Parler, suggest this network is targeting primarily authentic right-wing users they hope will assist them in promoting content on mainstream social media platforms that have, or they assess will, crack down on inauthentic accounts.

Based on our analysis of the content from these posts, we assess the primary goals of this network are to drive clicks to news sites run by Guo Media, to direct social media users from mainstream platforms to Guo Media content on fringe platforms like Parler, and to push political content that is primarily anti-CCP, anti-Joe Biden, and pro-Donald Trump, as seen in examples below:



1 This text was translated using Twitter's translation function.

This troll network has actively spread false information and conspiracy theories targeting the US election. Accounts associated with this network, including the Lude Media account on YouTube, have pushed a so-called “Red Mirage” conspiracy. This conspiracy falsely claims that former presidential Michael Bloomberg is funding alleged Antifa plans to conduct riots around the White House after Trump declares victory. We also observed that QAnon followers have been promoting the “Red Mirage” conspiracy, among other election-day narratives promoted by the troll network.

We discovered that the network uses several different tactics to drive traffic to their content, obfuscate their work, and coordinate their messaging. For example, the network routinely links to Guo Media websites and posts images with QR codes to subscribe to Guo Media content. They also use key hashtags to spread its content that were started by Guo. These include, for example:

#NewFederalStateofChina

Used to promote the self-declared exiled Chinese government announced by Guo and Bannon earlier this year²

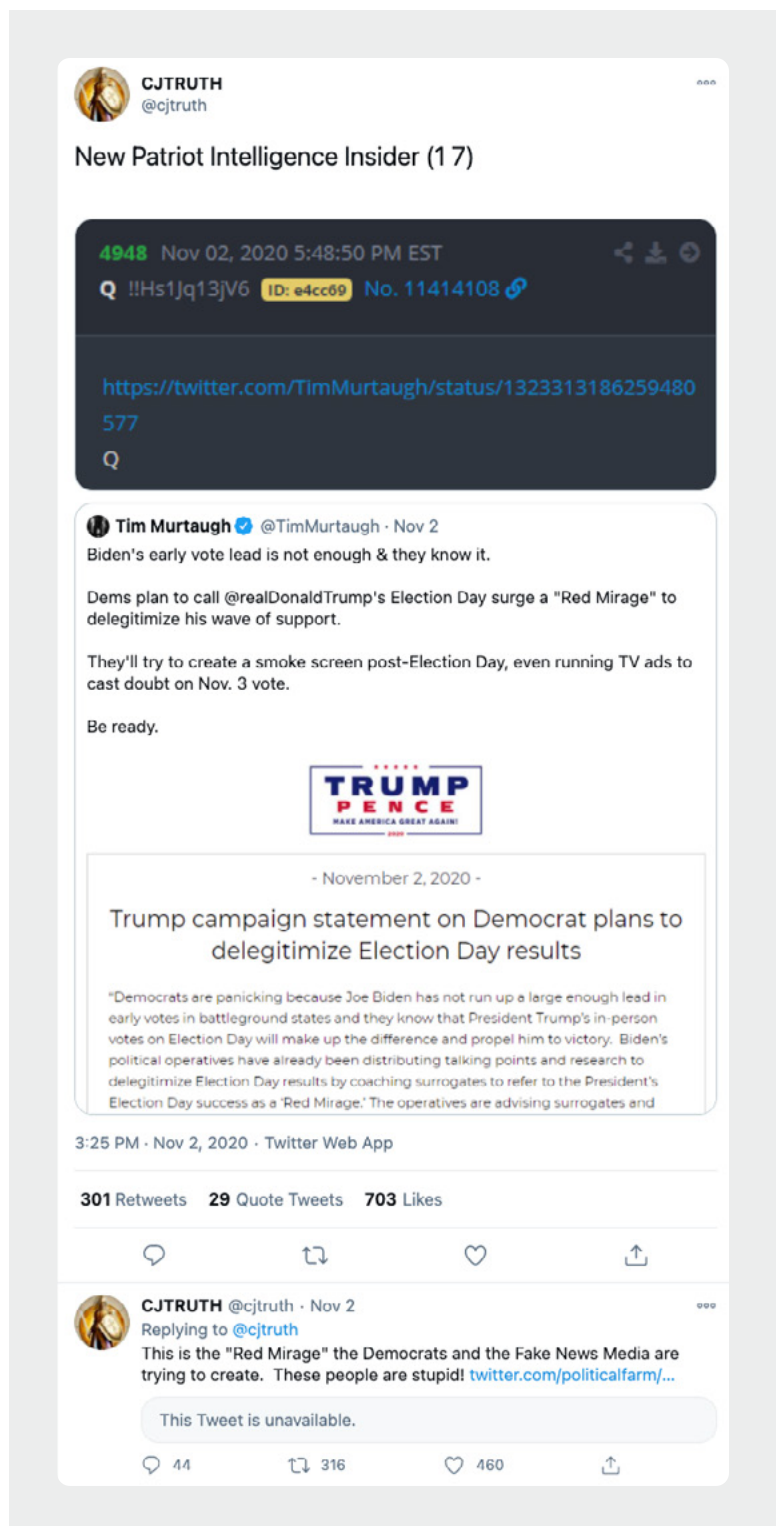
Alethea Group also observed additional hashtags used by the network that suggest links to Guo:

#WhistleblowerMovement

Used to amplify alleged complaints by a Chinese whistleblower about the CCP’s role in the coronavirus

#TakeDownTheCCP

Used to promote anti-CCP content



² <https://foreignpolicy.com/2020/10/28/guo-wengui-sending-mobs-after-chinese-dissidents-bannon-ccp/>

#LudeMedia

Part of Guo Media

Additionally, we observed the same network using politically charged hashtags that, given the relationship between Guo and Bannon, could signal coordination:

#BidenCrimeFamily

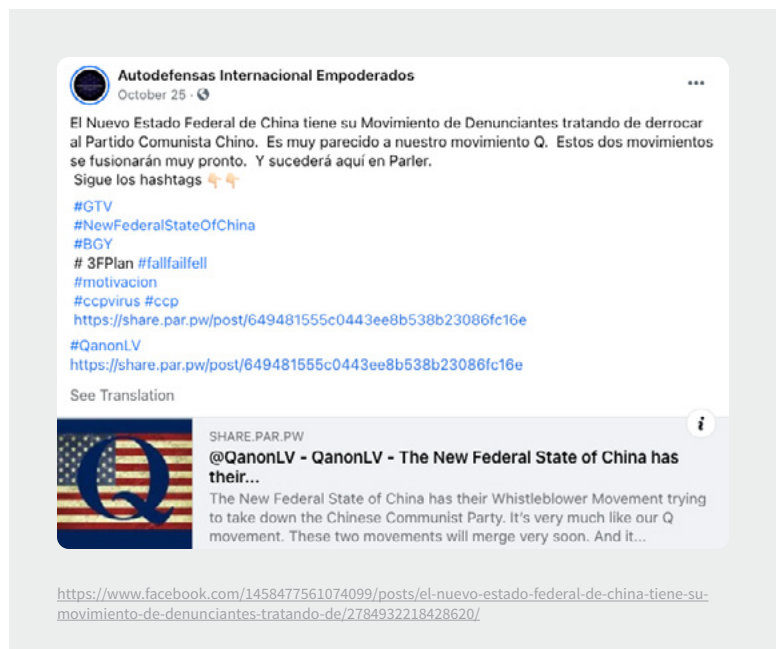
Used to promote conspiracy theories about Joe Biden and his son Hunter Biden

We discovered planning and coordinating documents created by this network that show it closely monitors things like key words, the popularity of US-based news sites, and the success of articles published by Guo Media outlets on platforms like Parler to tune their content for maximum impact and to game the algorithms of mainstream social media platforms to amplify their content.

Posts by this network often include vivid images, such as pornographic images and videos alleging to be of Hunter Biden, coupled with QR codes to encourage people to sign up for Guo Media websites. For example, accounts have routinely promoted a false conspiracy theory tying Paul Pelosi Jr. (Speaker Nancy Pelosi's son) to Hunter Biden. The network also frequently used non-descript screenshots of images on Pornhub to promote false claims about Biden.

We discovered the network operating multiple servers on Discord that they call "farms" and have set up regionally, many of which have corresponding accounts on mainstream social media platforms like Twitter. The network uses these servers to coordinate its activities. Included in the servers are Google Docs with scripted messages and links in Mandarin and English for workers to post on social media (see screenshots below for examples of content from these docs).

Within one of the Discord servers, Alethea Group uncovered a spreadsheet of Twitter accounts identified in swing states that the troll accounts were directed to tag and spam with content. That same spreadsheet has a column for the number of electoral votes each swing state has, demonstrating an intention to target voters in select states. An analysis of some of the Twitter accounts in this network showed they routinely tweeted at the accounts identified in their internal spreadsheet. One of the planning documents we discovered also included a list of multiple



Discord servers and WhatsApp channels in several different languages, such as Russian, French, and Japanese, used by this network to coordinate and communicate.

Ahead of the US election, users in one of the Discord servers encouraged workers to post US election content in Spanish. According to one post on November 2, 2020, "On the last day before the election, can we spread the truth and heavy revelations as much as possible in Spanish? Only the states of California, Nevada, New Mexico, Texas and Louisiana that border Mexico have a lot of sayings. Spanish-speaking American voters, Spanish-speaking American voters are different from American voters in other languages. The vast majority of the illegal immigrants who were amnestied during the Obama era were Spanish-speaking transit refugees. These people are generally less educated and weak in English."



Several posts in these channels include instructions posted as recently as October 29, 2020 for workers on how to create fake Twitter accounts. On November 3, 2020, a user in one of the channels posted that they received a flyer in their mailbox directing them to one of the network's Discord servers. They posted a picture of the apparent flyer, which contained claims about the CCP's role in coronavirus.

Twitter removed 150 accounts in this network on November 3, however accounts in this network have continued to post about the election across social media platforms.

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