

# [***Anonymous users are dominating right-wing discussions online. They also spread false information***](https://advance.lexis.com/api/document?collection=news&id=urn:contentItem:6BR9-VT61-DYMD-6532-00000-00&context=1516831)

The Associated Press

April 6, 2024 Saturday 3:37 PM GMT

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**Section:** BUSINESS NEWS; DOMESTIC NEWS; POLITICAL NEWS

**Length:** 1323 words

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**Dateline:** NEW YORK

**Body**

NEW YORK — The reposts and expressions of shock from public figures followed quickly after a user on the social platform X who uses a pseudonym claimed that a government website had revealed “skyrocketing” rates of voters registering without a photo ID in three states this year — two of them crucial to the presidential contest.

“Extremely concerning,” X owner Elon Musk replied twice to the post this past week.

“Are migrants registering to vote using SSN?” Georgia Rep. Marjorie Taylor Greene, an ally of former President Donald Trump, asked on Instagram, using the acronym for Social Security number.

Trump himself posted to his own social platform within hours to ask, “Who are all those voters registering without a Photo ID in Texas, Pennsylvania, and Arizona??? What is going on???"

State election officials soon found themselves forced to respond. They said the user, who pledges to fight, expose and mock “wokeness,” [*was wrong*](https://apnews.com/article/fact-check-migrants-voter-registration-skyrocketing-905290261987) and had distorted Social Security Administration data. Actual voter registrations during the time period cited were much lower than the numbers being shared online.

Stephen Richer, the recorder in Maricopa County, Arizona, which includes Phoenix, refuted the claim in [*multiple*](https://twitter.com/stephen_richer/status/1775644775829655596) [*X posts*](https://twitter.com/stephen_richer/status/1775264594455679387?s=20) while Jane Nelson, the secretary of state in Texas, issued a [*statement*](https://www.sos.state.tx.us/about/newsreleases/2024/040324.shtml) calling it “totally inaccurate."

Yet by the time they tried to correct the record, the false claim had spread widely. In three days, the pseudonymous user’s claim amassed more than 63 million views on X, according to the platform’s metrics. A thorough explanation from Richer attracted a fraction of that, reaching 2.4 million users.

The incident sheds light on how social media accounts that shield the identities of the people or groups behind them through clever slogans and cartoon avatars have come to dominate right-wing political discussion online even as they spread false information.

The accounts enjoy a massive reach that is boosted by engagement algorithms, by social media companies greatly reducing or eliminating efforts to remove phony or harmful material, and by endorsements from high-profile figures such as Musk. They also can generate substantial financial rewards from X and other platforms by ginning up outrage against Democrats.

Many such internet personalities identify as patriotic citizen journalists uncovering real corruption. Yet their demonstrated ability to spread misinformation unchecked while disguising their true motives worries experts with the United States in a presidential election year.

They are exploiting a long history of trust in American whistleblowers and anonymous sources, said Samuel Woolley, director of the Propaganda Research Lab at the University of Texas at Austin.

“With these types of accounts, there’s an allure of covertness, there’s this idea that they somehow might know something that other people don’t,” he said. “They’re co-opting the language of genuine whistleblowing or democratically inclined leaking. In fact what they’re doing is antithetical to democracy.”

The claim that spread online this past week [*misused*](https://apnews.com/article/fact-check-migrants-voter-registration-skyrocketing-905290261987) Social Security Administration data tracking routine requests made by states to verify the identity of individuals who registered to vote using the last four digits of their Social Security number. These requests are often made multiple times for the same individual, meaning they do not necessarily correspond one-to-one with people registering to vote.

The larger implication is that the cited data represents people who entered the U.S. illegally and are supposedly registering to vote with Social Security numbers they received for work authorization documents. But [*only U.S. citizens*](https://www.usa.gov/who-can-vote) are allowed to vote in federal elections and illegal voting by those who are not is [*exceedingly rare*](https://apnews.com/article/2022-midterm-elections-noncitizens-voting-question-d720a6d02e066700d86812dc717906e5) because states have processes to prevent it.

Accounts that do not disclose the identities of those behind them have thrived online for years, gaining followers for their content on ***politics***, humor, human rights and more. People have used anonymity on social media to avoid persecution by repressive authorities or to speak freely about sensitive experiences. Many left-wing protesters adopted anonymous online identities during the [*Occupy Wall Street movement*](https://apnews.com/article/entertainment-europe-new-york-d6e32ff3cef74bc4b5229cb76e316969) of the early 2010s.

The meteoric rise of a group of right-wing pseudonymous influencers who act as alternative information sources has been more recent. It's coincided with a decline in public trust in government and media through the 2020 presidential election and the COVID-19 pandemic.

These influencers frequently spread misinformation and otherwise misleading content, often in service of the same recurring narratives such as alleged voter fraud, the “woke agenda” or Democrats supposedly encouraging a surge of people through illegal immigration to steal elections or replace whites. They often use similar content and reshare each other's posts.

The account that posted the recent misinformation also has spread bogus information about the Israel-Hamas war, sharing a post last fall that falsely claimed to show a [*Palestinian “crisis actor"*](https://apnews.com/article/fact-check-israel-hamas-gaza-false-crisis-actors-068772255064) pretending to be seriously injured.

Since his takeover of Twitter in 2022, Musk has nurtured the rise of these accounts, frequently commenting on their posts and sharing their content. He also has protected their anonymity. In March, X updated its privacy policy to ban people from exposing the identity of an anonymous user.

Musk also rewards high engagement with financial payouts. The X user who spread the false information about new voter registrants has racked up more than 2.4 million followers since joining the platform in 2022. The user, in a post last July, reported earning more than $10,000 from X's new creator ad revenue program. X did not respond to a request for comment, which was met with an automated reply.

Tech watchdogs said that while it’s critical to maintain spaces for anonymous voices online, they shouldn’t be allowed to spread lies without accountability.

“Companies must vigorously enforce terms of service and content policies that promote election integrity and information integrity generally,” said Kate Ruane, director of the Free Expression Project at the Center for Democracy and Technology.

The success of these accounts shows how financially savvy users have deployed the online trolling playbook to their advantage, said Dale Beran, a lecturer at Morgan State University and the author of “It Came from Something Awful: How a Toxic Troll Army Accidentally Memed Donald Trump into Office.”

“The art of trolling is to get the other person enraged," he said. "And we now know getting someone enraged really fuels engagement and gives you followers and so will get you paid. So now it’s sort of a business.”

Some pseudonymous accounts on X have used their brands to build loyal audiences on other platforms, from Instagram to the video-sharing platform Rumble and the encrypted messaging platform Telegram. The accounts themselves — and many of their followers — publicly promote their pride in America and its founding documents.

It's concerning that many Americans place their trust in these shadowy online sources without thinking critically about who is behind them or how they may want to harm the country, said Kara Alaimo, a communications professor at Farleigh Dickinson University who has written about toxicity on social media.

“We know that foreign governments including China and Russia are actively creating social media accounts designed to sow domestic discord because they think weakening our social fabric gives their countries a competitive advantage," she said. "And they’re right.”

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The Associated Press receives support from several private foundations to enhance its explanatory coverage of elections and democracy. See more about AP’s democracy initiative [*here*](https://www.ap.org/press-releases/2022/ap-announces-sweeping-democracy-journalism-initiative). The AP is solely responsible for all content.

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This story has been corrected to reflect that the name of the Texas secretary of state is Jane Nelson, not Janet Nelson.

**Load-Date:** April 6, 2024

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