

Pro-CCP Spamouflage campaign experiments with new tactics targeting the US

18-23 minutes

1 April 2024

By: [Elise Thomas](#)

The Spamouflage network is a long-running and widespread but largely ineffective operation, traditionally pushing pro-CCP narratives. However, there is evidence that operators are now experimenting with new ways to increase their influence.

One tactic, which ISD has called 'MAGAflage', involves accounts posing as right-wing Americans and exploiting domestic divisions. Although this strategy appears to be nascent, it has the potential to make Spamouflage significantly more effective.

The Spamouflage campaign has become infamous amongst researchers for both its dogged persistence and its lack of significant innovation, despite the apparent futility of its operations. Since at least 2017 it has used thousands of accounts to spam low quality and unconvincing content across more than 50 websites, forums and social media platforms, receiving little or no engagement from real users. Even the adoption of new technology, such as generative AI to create fake movie posters, has had little impact.

However, recent investigations into Spamouflage's targeting of the conflict in Gaza and the US elections uncovered small but concerning tactical evolutions in Spamouflage activity on X. The accounts are using real videos, images and viral posts targeting US culture war issues, primarily from a right-wing perspective. This includes LGBTQ+ issues, immigration, racism, guns, drugs and crime. For the first time we have also found Spamouflage accounts posing convincingly as Americans.

Although the approach to some degree resembles tactics used by Russian state actors, there is no indication of any direct coordination (although this cannot be ruled out). It is possible that the Spamouflage operators, like many influence campaigns before them, have simply concluded that amplifying real, existing divisions using real, existing content is the cheapest, easiest and most effective route to deepen political and social divides in the US.

Although only a handful of accounts have effected this change and it has not been universally successful, it has already generated engagement from real US users. The vast scale of Spamouflage has previously been offset by its ineffectual tactics and unconvincing content; if the operators find a strategy which works, potentially augmented by generative AI, it could start to become a real problem.

This is particularly concerning in light of the erosion in the capacity of major platforms to detect and respond to sophisticated influence operations, after [key Trust and Safety teams have been dismantled or substantially reduced over the past year](#).

The three examples below illustrate the incremental changes in Spamouflage's content since 2017. In the early years, most posts consisted of JPGs which looked as though they had been put together in Microsoft Paint or something similar. These featured several paragraphs in Mandarin and usually a couple of images and would be posted alongside Mandarin or English text. Around mid-2020 their repertoire began to include [videos featuring automated voiceovers](#), again in a blend of English and Mandarin. As of at least 2023 they also began to incorporate AI generated images to illustrate their narratives. Notably, none of these appear to have been successful at generating significant organic engagement from real users.



Figure 1: Samples of different styles of Spamouflage content from June 2020, August 2020 and June 2024.

The MAGAflage accounts

ISD has identified four accounts linked to Spamouflage which are posing, convincingly, as supporters of Donald Trump and the MAGA movement, and a fifth which is posing as Greek but engaging with American political topics. Although all have posted significant quantities of Spamouflage content and narratives supporting the Chinese Communist Party, they are not being artificially boosted by the rest of the Spamouflage network.

Instead, they are building authentic pro-Trump audiences, including through MAGA community 'follow trains' in which social media users agree to follow one another and so boost each other's follower count. They have also posted asking for more followers, receiving hundreds of apparently organic likes and replies.



Figure 2: Two accounts identified as part of the Spamouflage campaign, posing as MAGA supporters.



Ben 🇺🇸🇺🇸🇺🇸🇺🇸 **MAGA 2024** @ktwsports · Jan 10

...

I have over 6,000 followers, but my tweets are always invisible, so aren't my Patriot followers real accounts? Please say hi to me! Patriots need to be seen by more people.

💬 314

↻ 103

❤️ 628

📊 18K



Ben 🇺🇸🇺🇸🇺🇸🇺🇸 **MAGA 2024** @ktwsports · Nov 3, 2023

...

Any chance my followers and fellow patriots can help me get my followers up to 5,000? I always follow back! Please share, and thanks! 🇺🇸 📷

💬 54

↻ 69

❤️ 155

📊 8.7K



Figure 3: Tweet from @ktwsport asking for more followers from 'fellow patriots'.

One of the accounts, @WubbaLubbaDub18 began in 2020 as a standard Spamouflage account. It was engaged mostly in boosting official CCP accounts and pro-CCP narratives such as smearing Hong Kong's pro-democracy protesters in Mandarin. The account fell silent between April 2022 and May 2023. When it resumed it was posting in English and sharing AI-generated content to illustrate narratives, which is increasingly common across the network (for more on this see this [previous Dispatch](#) on Spamouflage and the US 2024 elections). It is possible that the account may have changed its name, profile picture and bio around this time.

During this period the account frequently posted Spamouflage's AI-generated 'movie posters', as discussed above, as well as posting anti-Biden and pro-Trump texts in English. Once on 13 May the account operator appears to have forgotten to translate their content, instead responding in [Mandarin](#) to a tweet from the official Trump Campaign account.



Team Trump (Text TRUMP to 88022)  @TeamTrump · May 13, 2023 ...



131

206

666

47K



 Liam  REPUBLICAN PARTY! AMERICA FIRST 

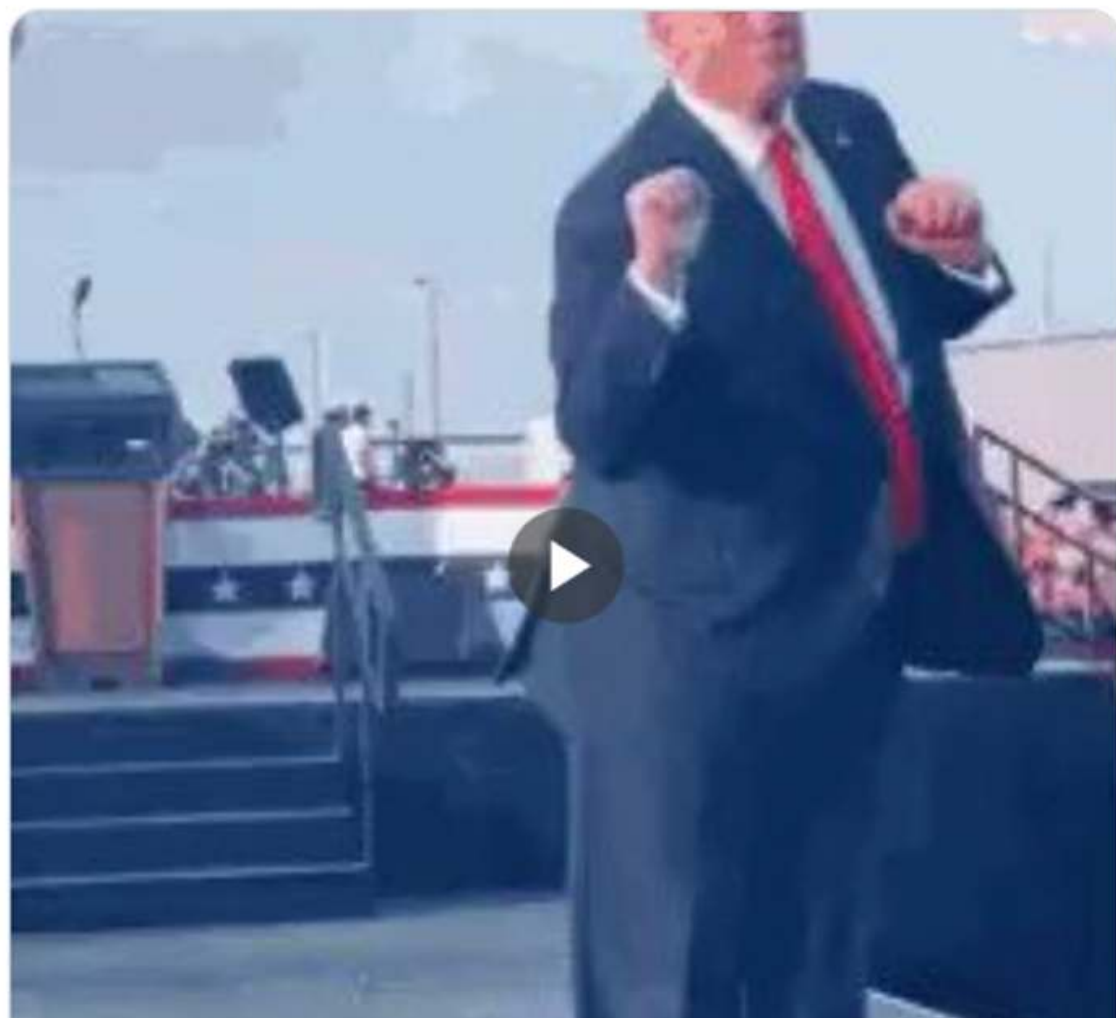
@WubbaLubbaDub18



7500万特朗普粉丝不会错!

Translated from Chinese by Google

75 million Trump fans can't be wrong!





2:24 AM · May 13, 2023 · 150 Views

Figure 4: Post from @WubbaLubbaDub18 in Mandarin, responding to the Trump Campaign.

Initially its posts generated no engagement, authentic or artificial. However, in mid-May 2023 it began engaging with genuine Trump supporters. By the end of May, the account's posts were generating double-digit engagements and it has continued to generate consistent double or triple-digit engagements on most of its posts until at least February 2024.

At some point during this period, the account subscribed to X's Premium service, and presumably is benefiting from features including an algorithmic boost on its replies. Numerous reports have identified abuse of the X Premium service by [state-linked influence operations](#), [terrorist organisations](#) and by [garden-variety scammers and fraudsters](#). The extremely [deep cuts](#) made to Trust and Safety teams on the platform in 2023 are likely to be a contributing factor in the failure to detect and prevent these kinds of things from occurring.

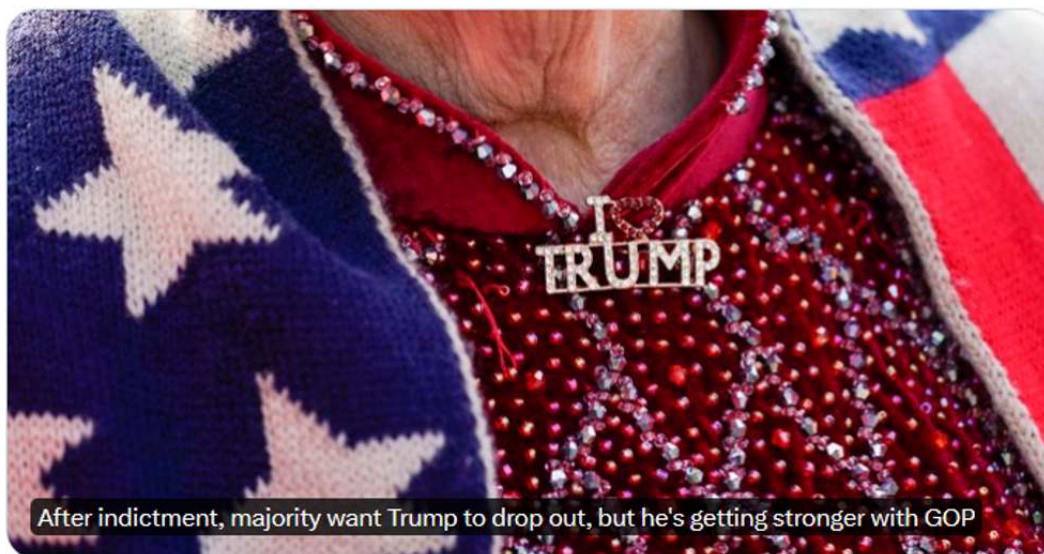


Liam **REPUBLICAN PARTY ! AMERICA FIRST**

@WubbaLubbaDub18



Despite facing indictment, Trump's support among our core Republican base is growing stronger. This reaffirms his powerful leadership and underlines the need for his guidance in propelling America forward. Let's rally for [#Trump2024](#)



From npr.org

2:28 AM · Jun 18, 2023 · 12K Views



Figure 5: A post by @WubbaLubbaDub18 from June 2023 with 304 likes and at least 12,000 views.

A second MAGAflage account, @ktwsports, has been identified as part of the network because it has posted multiple word-for-word posts and images from known Spamouflage accounts. It was created in 2010 but was either inactive or earlier content has been deleted. The earliest currently available post was on 18 April 2023, when the account began amplifying posts implying that politicians, in particular Joe Biden, are paedophiles, linked to Jeffrey Epstein, and potentially Satanic.



Figure 6: First two available posts from @ktwsports inferring that Biden behaves inappropriately towards young girls and is linked to Jeffrey Epstein, and suggesting that “most of senior politicians are paedophiles”.

The account has been working to build a persona as an American man living in Los Angeles. On 22 January it posted a picture of a man and the caption “Good morning! Patriots, I’m 43 years old, and passionately and loyally supporting President Trump!” Both this image and the profile picture were taken from a travel blog belonging to a Danish man whose other content gives no indication of support for Donald Trump.

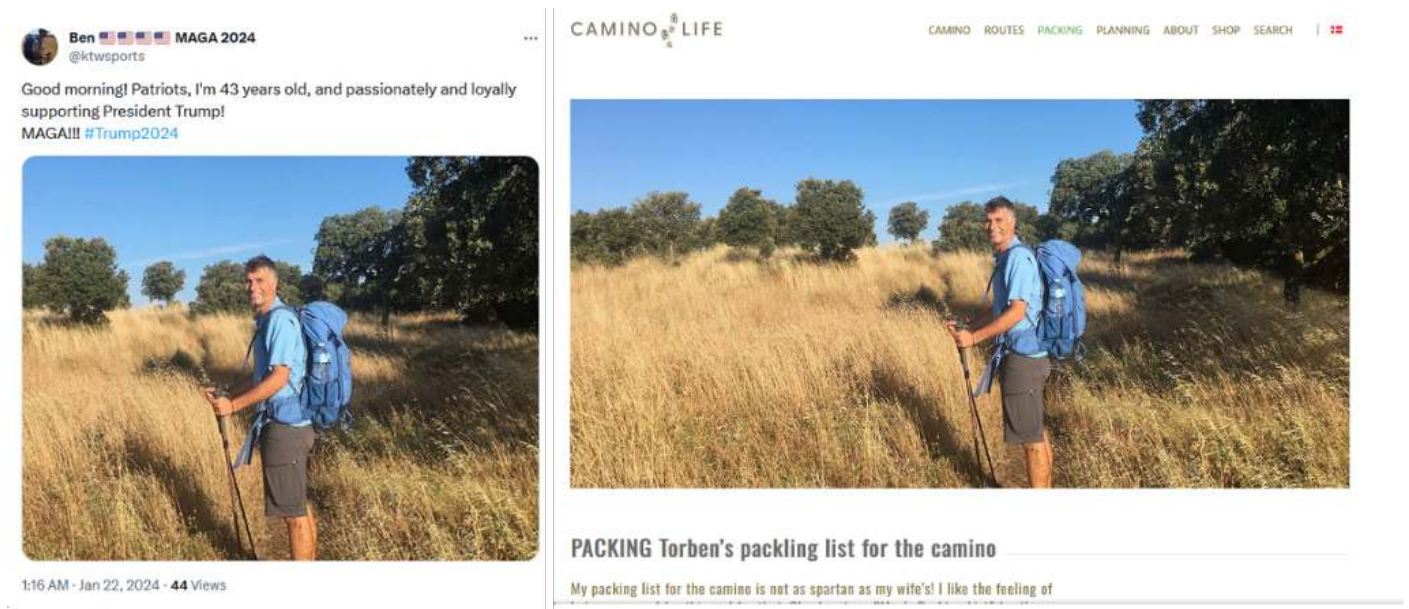


Figure 7: A post from @ktwsports implying that this is a picture of the person who owns the account (left) and the same picture of the real person, a Danish travel blogger (right).

Based on the occasional grammatical and spelling errors, the content appears to be being written manually rather than being generated using AI tools. Other slip-ups include a YouTube video being shared using a browser set to Mandarin, resulting in the word ‘from’ appearing in Mandarin in the post.



Ben 🇺🇸🇺🇸🇺🇸🇺🇸 MAGA 2024

@ktwsports



Joe Biden 'belongs in a nursing home' not the White House youtu.be/BkYaUF419K0 来自 @YouTube



youtube.com

Joe Biden 'belongs in a nursing home' not the White House
Sky News host Rita Panahi questions if Joe Biden is fit to be
President of the United States after he was spotted lookin...

12:37 PM · Jun 13, 2023 · 82 Views



Figure 8: A post from @ktwsports including text in Mandarin.

At least two other accounts have also made the switch from standard Spamouflage activity to this more tailored and convincing pro-MAGA content. One, @GailS5z, was created in 2016 but its earliest remaining activity begins on 28 February 2023.



Figure 9: The @GailS5s account on X.

It posted predominately in Mandarin sharing Spamouflage content until 16 April 2023. The account then went silent for several weeks, returning on 8 May posting in English. It then posted Spamouflage 'movie posters' alongside food and travel content, usually Chinese dishes or regions of China. As of March 2024, it has moved to a similar content strategy to @ktwsports and @WubbaLubbaDub18, posting videos or images along with commentary, usually with an anti-Biden and pro-Trump framing.

So far, this account appears to have been less successful than @WubbaLubbaDub18 in garnering a large authentic audience. As of late March @WubbaLubbaDub18 and @GailS5z have begun retweeting some of each other's content, perhaps in an effort to boost @GailS5z's audience.

Intriguingly, linked accounts for @GailS5z have been created on Instagram and Threads. In 2021 Graphika observed at least [one multi-platform Spamouflage persona](#) presenting as a Chinese woman, but as far as ISD is aware, this is one of the first documented efforts by Spamouflage to create a consistent multi-platform American persona.

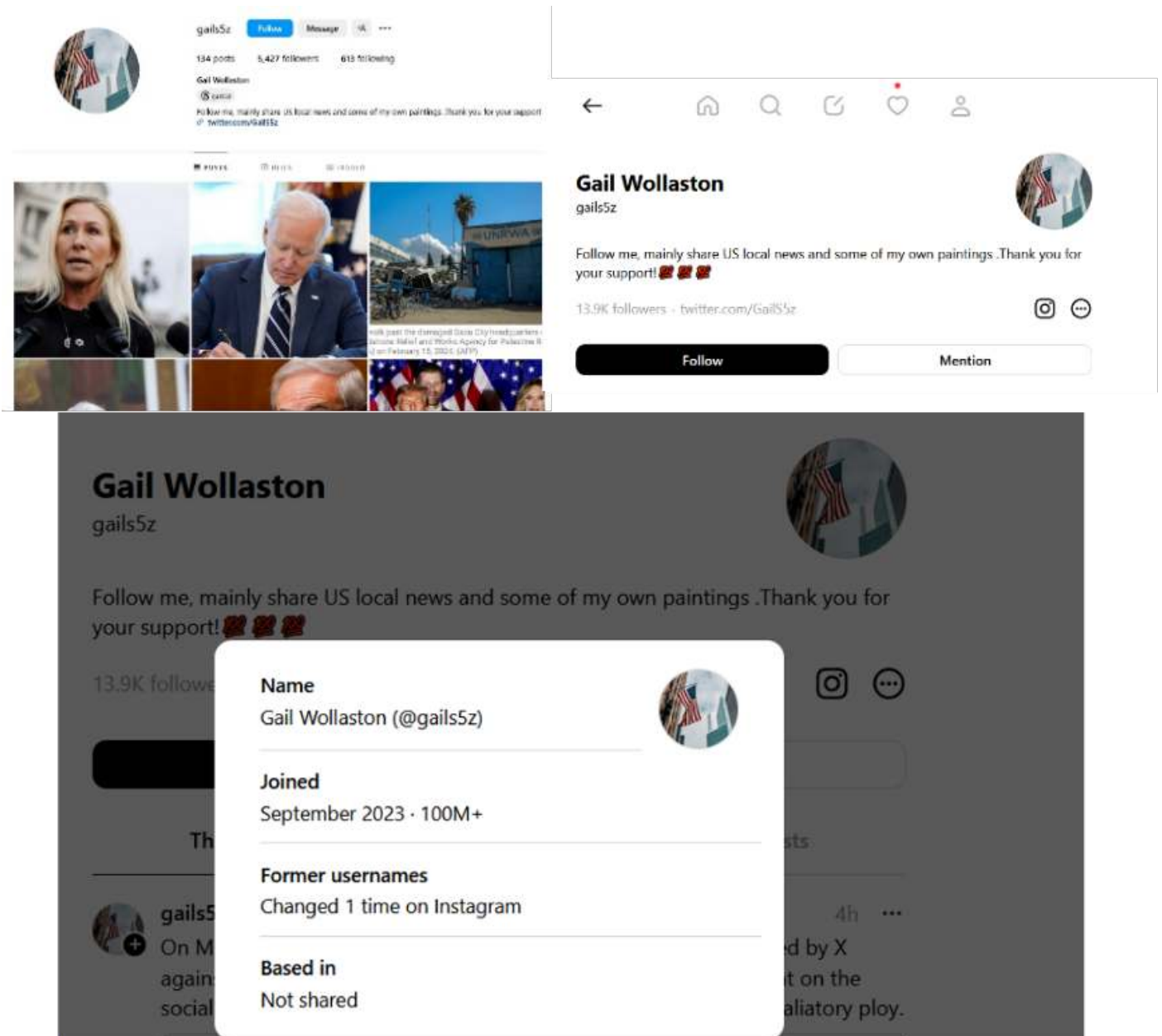


Figure 10: The GailS5z accounts on Instagram and Threads.

All of the MAGAflage accounts promote pro-Trump, anti-Biden, anti-liberal and anti-'woke' narratives, picking up on culture war issues and the outrage du jour in US right-wing information spaces. This includes dog-whistling at or overtly promoting conspiracy theories, such as those implying election fraud in 2020 or the potential for interference in 2024, and references to QAnon. Some of the content is original, but some is copied from viral tweets by large non-Spamouflage accounts.



Figure 11: Left, a tweet from high profile account @LibsofTikTok at 8:19AM on 26 March; right, an identical tweet from @GailS5z at 11:32AM on the same day.

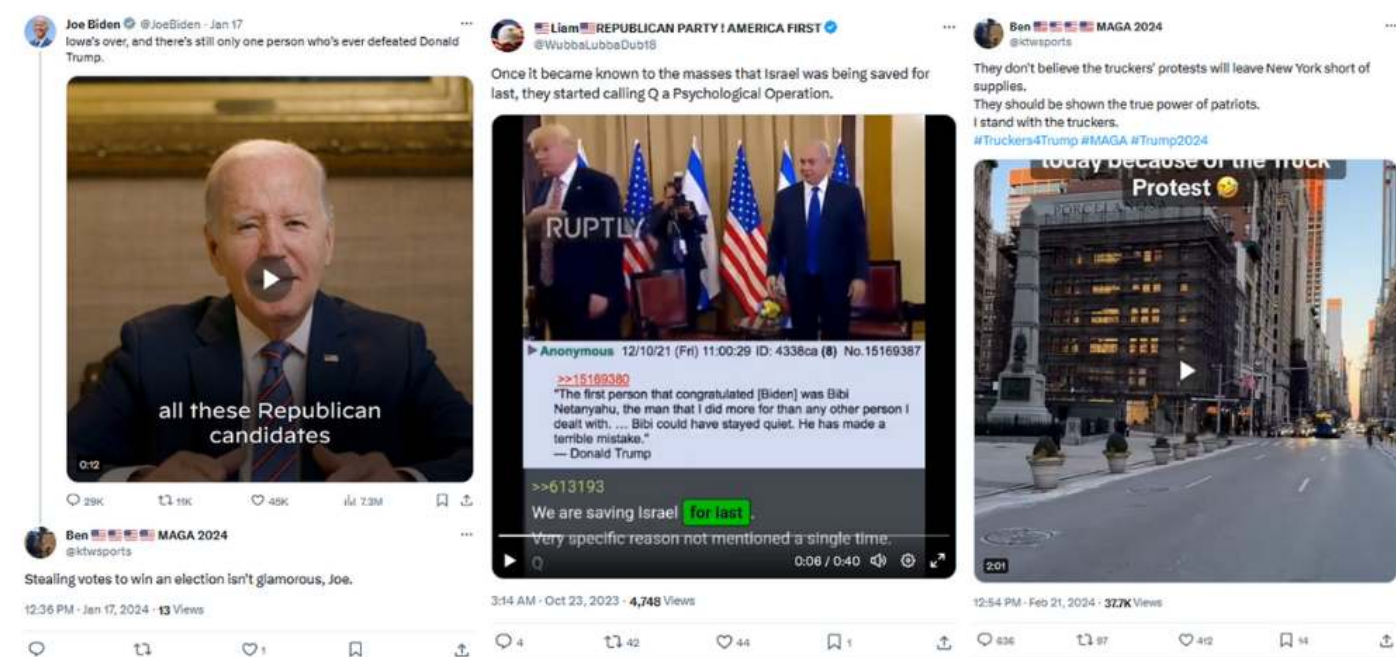


Figure 12: Posts implying that Biden stole votes and referring to the QAnon conspiracy theory (left) and picking up on the #Truckers4Trump hashtag (right).

In an interesting exchange on Threads, @GailS5z appears to have originally posted a claim that Leticia James and Arthur Engoron were seeking to “cheat” Trump in the 2024 election. After pushback from multiple, apparently authentic Threads users, the account appears to have edited the original post to much more neutral language. In a reply to one of its critics, the account wrote, “I’m just saying that someone did something to manipulate our election.” This comment is intriguing because it more or less spells out what message the account is seeking to promote through its activity.

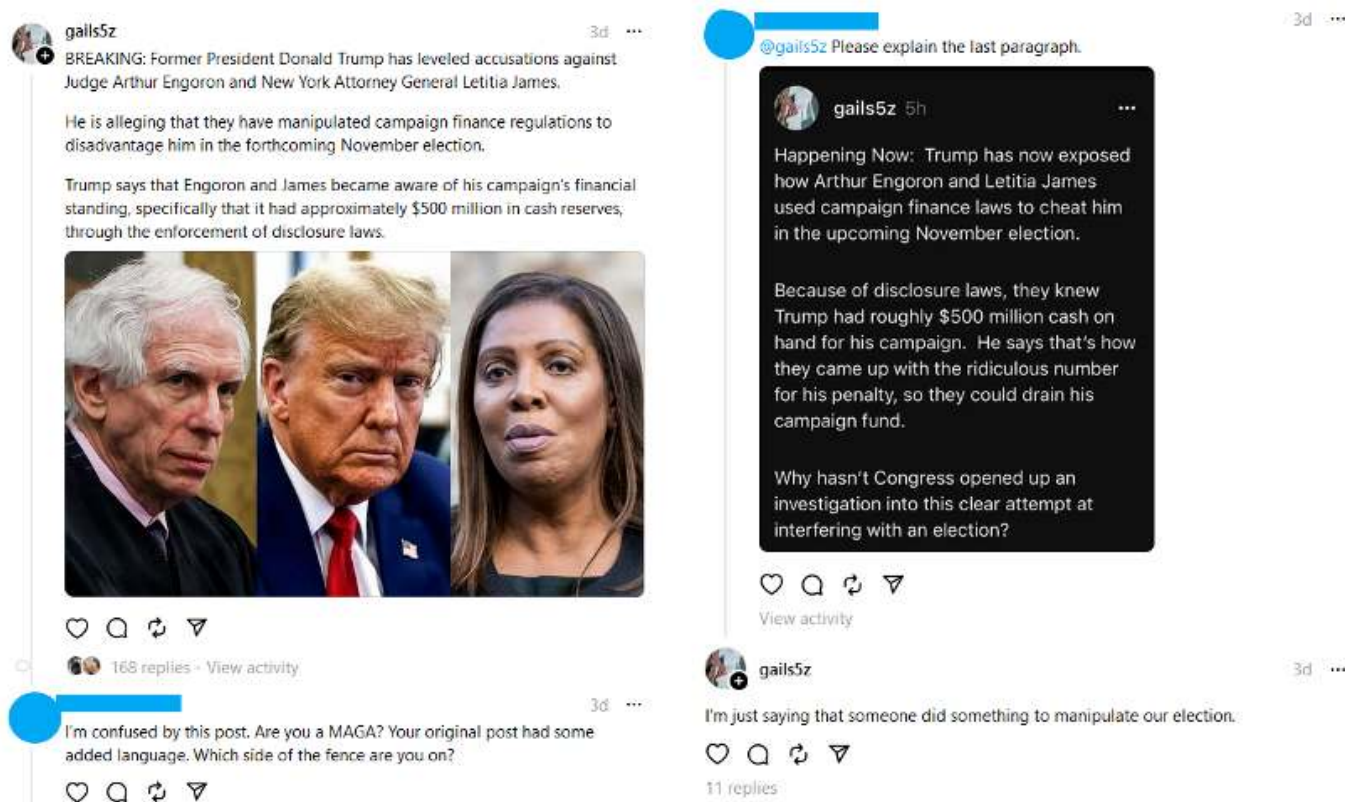


Figure 13: Screenshots of a Threads post and comments by the @GailS5z account.

In a truly remarkable example of how successful this MAGAflage approach can be, on 18 February 2024 the @ktwsports account shared a video from Russian state media organisation, RT. The clip and accompanying text alleged that Biden and the CIA had sent a neo-Nazi leader to fight in Ukraine with the Azov Battalion; records show [the man was in fact in Florida](#) and under active monitoring as part of his parole during the time he claims to have been fighting in Ukraine.

The post was by infamous US conspiracy theorist Alex Jones, with more than 3200 shares, 7100 likes and 365,500 views as of 4 March. The original @ktwsports post had also been shared 567 times, liked 921 times and seen by more than 416,100 users.



Alex Jones

@RealAlexJones

...

Meet the deputy leader of the "White Supremacy" group marching around the country. All just in time for the 2024 election.



Ben 🇺🇸🇺🇸🇺🇸🇺🇸 MAGA 2024 @ktwsports · Feb 18

One of the key members of "Blood Tribe", Kent McLellan, whose face is tattooed like a ghost and nicknamed "Bonesface", is a gangster who went to Ukraine to participate in the Azov Battalion genocide. He said in the video that Biden and the CIA had sent him to Ukraine.



12:43 AM · Feb 19, 2024 · 359.8K Views

239

3.2K

7.1K

277



Figure 14: Post by Alex Jones, quote-posting @ktwsports sharing an RT clip spreading disinformation about the Biden administration, the CIA and Ukraine.

The case of the Huawei Mate 60 Pro phone is an example of how this approach has the potential to be more effective at spreading pro-CCP narratives among real Trump supporters than the usual Spamouflage tactics.

In September 2023 Spamouflage, along with [other parts of the CCP propaganda apparatus](#), began running a narrative that Huawei's chip innovations were symbolic of a Chinese victory over US tech sanctions intended to hinder China's progress.

As with almost all of Spamouflage's content, this appeared to generate little if any engagement from accounts outside the Spamouflage network. However, two posts on the topic from a MAGAflage account, which frame it as a failure of the Biden administration, generated hundreds of seemingly genuine engagements and 16,000 to 20,000 views respectively.



Liam REPUBLICAN PARTY ! AMERICA FIRST
@WubbaLubbaDub18

Bloomberg, in collaboration with a professional research company, secretly conducted a thorough disassembly of the Huawei Mate 60. The research indicates that China has effectively circumvented the U.S. technology blockade, rendering the export controls imposed by the Biden administration on China almost meaningless. This suggests that President Biden has squandered the advantages accumulated by the United States over the past century, and he no longer has the ability to keep America great. After all, he can't even control his sleep schedule. 😊
[#HuaweiMate60Pro](#) [#Biden](#)



2:52 AM · Sep 9, 2023 · 20.3K Views

20

171

137

6



Liam REPUBLICAN PARTY ! AMERICA FIRST
@WubbaLubbaDub18

Huawei has developed advanced chips, which could render the U.S. export controls on advanced semiconductors meaningless! I can't fathom what Biden and his team are actually doing. Are they still on vacation or asleep? Our country's wealth is slowly eroding due to these corrupt and incompetent bureaucrats! [#huawei](#) [#Biden](#)



10:18 PM · Sep 7, 2023 · 16K Views

10

110

125



Figure 15: Posts from @WubbaLubbaDub18 about the Huawei Mate 60 phone.

Another striking example of how these accounts can be used to promote pro-CCP narratives about US-China tech policy issues cropped up in late March 2024, as the US government debated passing legislation which would force Chinese company ByteDance to divest its ownership of TikTok or face a potential ban on TikTok in

US-owned app stores. @GailS5z, @ktwsports and another evolved Spamouflage account, @d_anastasiadis,^[1] have both posted about the TikTok ban, with the former calling it 'true authoritarianism' and the latter suggesting that Israel is the true sinister party behind the ban. @d_anastasiadis also appears to have had an [associated TikTok account](#) created on 20 March 2024.



Gail Wollaston
@Gail55z

The amount of Americans who support banning Tiktok plummeted last year. Only 38% of Americans support banning Tiktok

Despite that, 81% of Congress voted to ban Tiktok

This is what true authoritarianism looks like



11:53 AM · Mar 22, 2024 · 20.2K Views



Ben
@ktwsports

If Tiktok is banned or acquired, the biggest beneficiaries are bound to be Zuckerberg's Meta and Google.

In doing so, they will continue to help Biden destroy this country and true democracy.

Yes or No?



Eastern Awakened Lion
@d_anastasiedis

Who Is REALLY behind the TikTok ban? (🇺🇸)

TikTok has 103 million monthly active users in the US.

More than 1/3 (37.36%) of mobile internet users actively engage with TikTok.

Half of TikTok's US users are between the age of 10 and 29, with teens making up the bulk of the user base.

Over 50% of content creators are between 18 and 24 years old.

From October 23-30, 2023, posts with the # 'standwithPalestine' were posted 10x more than posts with the # 'standwithIsrael'.

Posts with the # 'standwithPalestine' also received 5x as many views.

When TikTok was accused of deliberately pushing Pro-Palestinian content, they denied the claim and made it clear that the algorithm pushes whatever people engage with.

Jonathan Greenblatt, the director of the Anti-Defamation League (ADL), which is an extremely powerful Jewish-Zionist organization that has often targeted free speech, was very worried by this.

Seeing Gen Z in the US overwhelmingly support Palestine in the face of Israeli aggression, TERRIFIED him.

Is it a coincidence that after months of intense push in Congress, the TikTok Ban Act passed?

They are demanding that the Chinese company 'ByteDance' sell the platform if the app wants to remain in the US.

With the ADL being so entangled with this decision, I would imagine they'd want to manipulate the algorithm to push Pro-Israeli content while halting Pro-Palestinian content.

The Chinese lobby isn't a lobby Americans should be worried about, it's the Zionist one.

Because the Zionist lobby has been altering US domestic and foreign policy for over half a century.

#TikTok #StandWithPalestine #savePalestine #SaveGaza

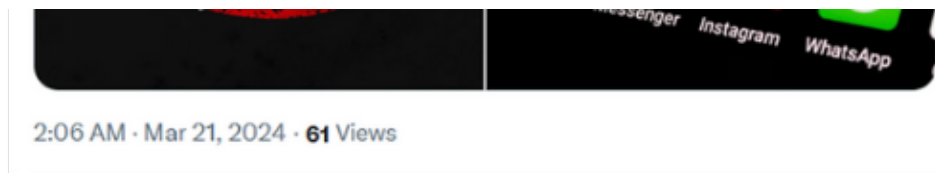


Figure 16: Tweets by @GailS5z, @ktwsports and evolved Spamouflage account @d_anastasiadis about TikTok.

It is possible that this handful of accounts are the only ones of their kind and that this is a completely isolated experiment which will go no further. But it is also *possible* that this is not the case, especially given Spamouflage's usual pattern of operating at enormous scale. Newly created or repurposed accounts without a history of previous Spamouflage activity engaging in this behaviour would be very difficult for external researchers to detect. There may also be similar accounts active on the other side of politics supporting Biden, although no evidence of this has yet been found.

The 'fo' accounts

A less successful attempt for Spamouflage accounts to enter the 'culture wars', many (but not all) of these accounts have handles consisting of 'fo' and then eight digits – 'fo' or '互fo' is a reference to follow-back, meaning that the account will follow back any account which follows it.

Most of the non-Spamouflage content originates from three accounts, with one in particular being the most prolific. This is then amplified by a circle of accounts which mostly just repost content, a fairly standard structure for the operation.

The three primary accounts shifted focus radically in summer 2023, engaging in aggressive and vitriolic posts about topics including antisemitism, sex education, drag queens, drugs and gun crime. The content generally comes from a perspective of intending to chime with mainstream right-wing audiences except on the issue of Israel and the conflict in Gaza, where they have adopted a consistently pro-Palestinian and anti-Israel stance.

There was also a striking tonal shift from previous content which, while highly critical of the US, was formal and almost old-fashioned or quaint. The language used in these newer posts is far harsher and sometimes includes profanity.

Some of the comments are shockingly extreme. In one example, the account posted a genuine video of what appears to be a grieving Palestinian child with the dead body of his baby sister. The text includes the sentence "What Hitler did to Israel was right", presumably intended as a (historically garbled) reference to the Holocaust. In another case, the same account posted a video comparing Biden and the Democrats to Hitler and the Nazis and shared a meme (which does not appear to have been created by Spamouflage) about how America will be "Zio free."

Visibility limited: this Post may violate X's rules against Violent Speech. [Learn more](#)

This is not a war, bombing children and innocent people shows Israel's hatred towards the Muslim people of Gaza and Palestine. What Hitler did to Israel was right [#GazaHolocaust](#) [#Gaza](#) [#Hamas](#) [#الالهلال_مومباي](#) [#الاتحاد_القوة_الدوية](#) [#IsraelisaGenocidalState](#) [#Israeli](#)



3:03 AM · Nov 7, 2023 · 1,482 Views

14 Reposts 1 Quote 18 Likes

The New Democratic Nazi Party , Man the resemblance is staggering.



12:12 PM · Aug 18, 2023 · 3,330 Views

19 45 1

Figure 17: Posts referencing Hitler and the Nazis.



Figure 18: A post sharing a meme about how “America will be Zio Free.”

The accounts have also posted multiple very graphic images of dead and severely injured Palestinian children. These posts tend to be both anti-US and anti-Israel, although the examples below (**WARNING: GRAPHIC CONTENT**) interestingly appear to be trying to stoke resentment amongst Americans against Israel.

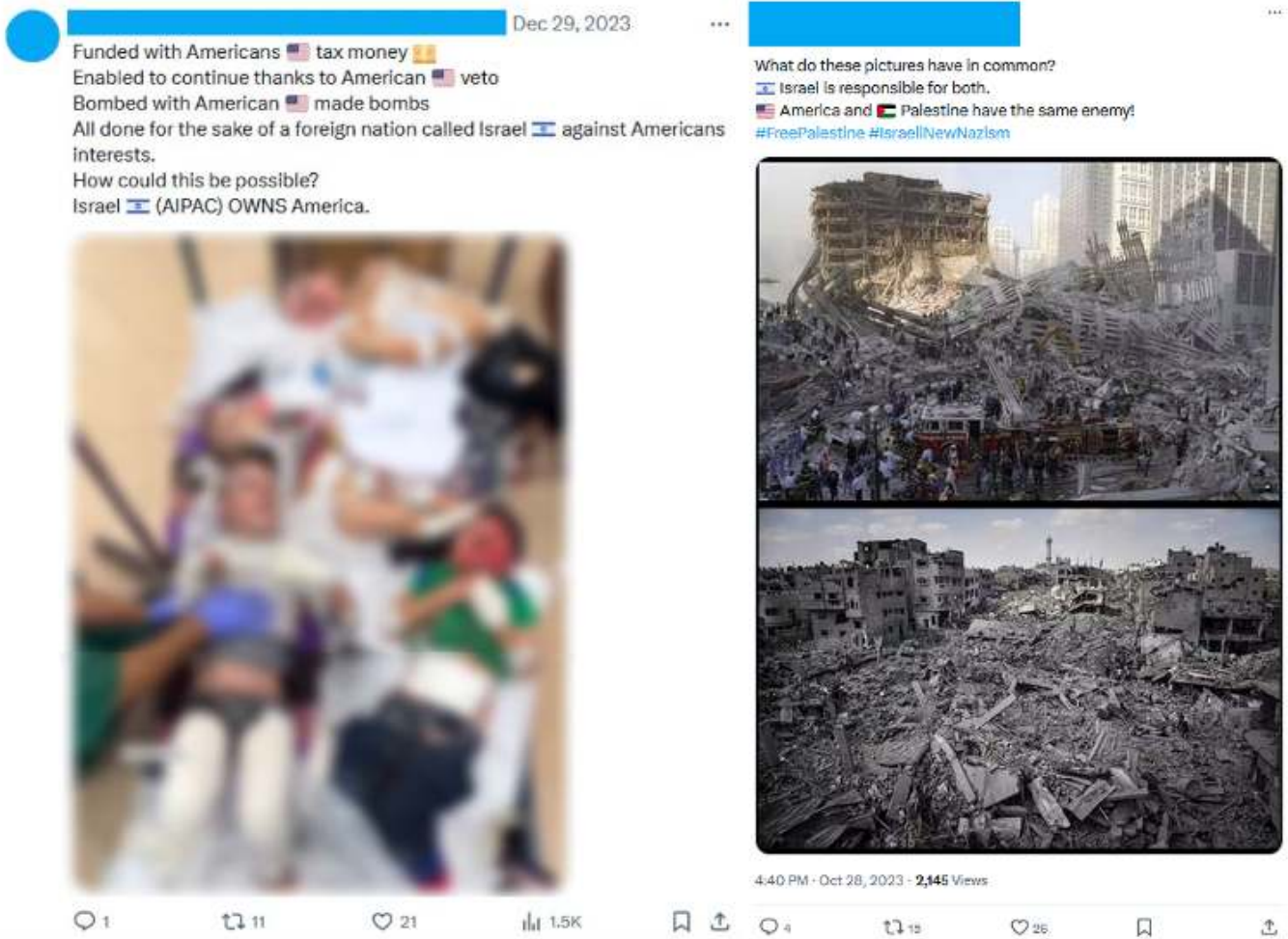


Figure 19: Posts sharing photos from the conflict in Gaza, apparently seeking to stoke resentment from American audiences against Israel.

Somewhat confusingly, even as the ‘fo’ accounts support Palestine, they have also posted numerous Islamophobic posts apparently aimed at American audiences. They have also presented similarly conflicting content supporting reparations for Black Americans and asserting that white people are the true victims of racism inflicted by black people.



Figure 20: Posts sharing anti-Muslim sentiments.



Figure 21: Posts sharing a video supporting reparations for Black Americans (left) and a video and post implying that black people are the “real racists” in America (right).

LGBTQ+ people and drag performers have also been a topic for the ‘fo’ accounts. This includes belatedly jumping on the bandwagon of the [controversy over the sex ed book *Gender Queer*](#) and dog-whistling about drag queens, making what appears to be a pro-Trump comparison between Melania Trump and Jill Biden.



Figure 22: Posts sharing anti-LGBTQ+ content.

While some posts are original, others are copied from viral posts by larger non-Spamouflage accounts. For example, a post on 8 January 2024 from a ‘fo’ account about immigration was copied from viral post made hours earlier by the account End Wokeness, with the hashtags #America and #AmericanFiction added. On 6

December, a similar post was copied from user @rgrblood. This suggests that the campaign operators may have identified topics of interest and are scanning for real viral content on those topics to copy.



Figure 23: Posts by @EndWokeness (left) and a Spamouflage 'fo' account (right).



Figure 24: Posts by @rgrblood (left) and a Spamouflage 'fo' account (right).

Unlike MAGAflage, as of early February 2024, the 'fo' accounts do not appear to be succeeding in breaking out of the Spamouflage bubble. Despite a small number of seemingly organic comments on some posts, engagement is overwhelmingly from what appear to be other Spamouflage accounts.

Conclusion

The accounts examined in this Dispatch represent two small-scale but evolving strategies for the Spamouflage campaign. It is important not to overstate their scale or impact at this stage.

However, these are nonetheless notable developments which will be important to monitor. A particular concern

is the possibility that there either already are – or that in the future there will be – many more ‘MAGAflage’ style accounts (or similar accounts supporting the Biden campaign) which evade the usual methods for detecting Spamouflage activity and are successful in generating real engagement.

Endnotes

[1] The @d_anastasiadis account presents itself as a Greek social media influencer, but posts regularly about US political issues and the war in Gaza. It appears that it initially may have belonged to an authentic Greek user, until April 2021 when it abruptly shifted from posting in Greek to posting in Mandarin. There is a long history of Spamouflage using hacked and stolen accounts, in some cases potentially purchased from account brokers. The account behaved like a standard Spamouflage account in both English and Mandarin until May 2022 when it began posting entirely in English. This account is not presenting as a Trump or MAGA supporter, but it is actively engaging on US political topics and in particular the war in Gaza from a pro-Palestinian and anti-Israel perspective, and has engaged with both @WubbaLubbaDub18 and @GailS5z.