

▲ The troll operation's top targets include the most prominent critics of Aliyev, center. Photograph: Anadolu Agency/Getty Images

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The flood of comments on the pages of dissidents also stymies online debate and has a "chilling effect" on others who may consider speaking out, the researcher added. "It shows everyone else that if you do this, you're going to be attacked."

At Facebook, Zhang rang the alarm bells, informing and repeatedly following up with various managers and executives as well as Facebook's threat intelligence team, which is tasked with investigating potential CIB campaigns. But it took until December 2019 for Facebook to assign an investigator to look into what was happening, and until February 2020 for that investigator to establish that the network was clearly connected to officials in the YAP.

Despite this evidence that an authoritarian regime was violating Facebook's rules in order to suppress dissent - a situation which should have qualified **returns months after ban**

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▲ Ilham Aliyev, center, has ruled Azerbaijan with an increasingly authoritarian grip since 2003. Illustration: Erre Gálvez/The Guardian

State-backed harassment campaign targets journalists and dissidents in authoritarian country

Facebook has allowed a state-backed harassment campaign targeting independent news outlets and opposition politicians in Azerbaijan to return to its platform, less than six months after it banned the troll network.

A Guardian investigation has revealed how Facebook allowed an arm of Azerbaijan's ruling party, the YAP, to carry out the harassment campaign for 14 months after an employee, Sophie Zhang, first alerted managers and executives to its existence in August 2019.

In October 2020, Facebook announced that it was removing more than 8,000 Facebook and Instagram accounts and Pages linked to the YAP for violating its policy against "coordinated inauthentic behavior" (CIB) - the kind of deceptive influence operation used by Russia to interfere in the 2016 US election.

The Facebook loophole

But a Guardian review of the operation's most common targets found that the trolling operation has clearly



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returned. An analysis of one post on the Facebook page for the independent social media outlet Azad Soz ("Free Speech") found that 294 of the top 301 comments (97.7%) came from Facebook Pages that had been set up to resemble user accounts - the same mechanism used by the CIB operation that Facebook banned.

The result appears to allow an authoritarian regime to drown out debate on one of the only venues for free expression available in Azerbaijan, a former Soviet republic that ranks 168th out of 180 countries on Reporters without Borders' World Press Freedom Index.

"Facebook isn't interested in countries like Azerbaijan," said Arzu Geybullayeva, an Azerbaijani journalist who lives in Turkey due to threats over her reporting. "Your report shows how indifferent the platform is to countries

not in the spotlight and less known. We have made several failed attempts before at getting Facebook to have someone from the Azerbaijani region to explain the context. They really can't be bothered."



Zhang uncovered the troll operation in the course of her work as a data scientist for a team at Facebook dedicated to combatting fake engagement: likes, shares and comments from inauthentic accounts. She found thousands of Facebook Pages - profiles for businesses, organizations and public figures - that had been set up to look like user accounts and were being used to inundate the Pages of Azerbaijani's few independent news outlets and opposition politicians on a strict schedule: the comments were almost exclusively made on weekdays between 9am and 6pm, with an hour break at lunch.

A list of the operation's top 20 targets, generated by Zhang in August 2020, resembles a list of the most prominent critics of Azerbaijan's autocratic leader, Ilham Aliyev, who has ruled with an increasingly authoritarian grip since 2003. It includes news outlets whose editors have been forced into exile, such as Azadliq newspaper, Azad Soz and Mikroskop Media; news outlets whose sites are blocked in Azerbaijan, such as Radio Free Europe and Abzas.net; and the political opposition, such as the Azerbaijan Popular Front party (APFP) and its chair, Ali Karimli. The party has been subject to what Human Rights Watch has called a "relentless crackdown".

How does fake engagement work?

This is a Facebook post on the Azerbaijani news page [Azad Soz](#).

It's about activists being sentenced to 8 months in prison for writing critical things about Azerbaijan politicians.

US authorities



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In a divided US, it's no surprise some see Simone Biles as a villain

Azad Soz
March 4 at 2:16 AM · 3

Şəki Apelasiya Məhkəməsi jurnalist Elçin Həsənzadəni və Mingacəvir Dövlət Dram Teatrının aktyoru, ictimai fəal İbrahim Salamov 8 ay müddətinə azadlıqlan məhrum edib. Hər iki fəal son zamanlar Mingacəvirde bax verən rüşvətçilər və məmər Əzbəginliyindən yazırlılar. Keçən dəfə Mingacəvirdən Azad Soz kanalında yayımladığımız "Süpürge etirazı"nı da jurnalist Elçin Həsənzadə çəkmışdı.

The Shaki Court of Appeal sentenced journalist Elçin Həsənzadə and Mingacəvir State Drama Theater actor, public activist İbrahim Salamov to 8 months in prison. Both activists were writing about bribery and arbitrariness of officials in Mingacəvir recently. Journalist Elçin Həsənzadə shot the "Sweeping protest" that we broadcast last time on the Free Word channel from Mingacəvir.
Translated



More than a thousand people commented on the post - most of them in support of the Azerbaijan government.

2 / 10

But if we dig further, there's something suspicious happening.

The top comment is from someone named [Zeyneb Babayeva](#).

3 / 10

If we click through to her profile, we see that this is not a user account.

It's a [Facebook Page for a coffee shop](#).

4 / 10

And it was created **less than two weeks** before they commented on this post.

5 / 10

Facebook has a rule that **each person** should only have **one account**.

But this Page exploits a loophole.

6 / 10

A single user can easily make multiple Pages like this one, posing as different people.

And this Page can do what a normal account can do: [comment, share and react](#).

7 / 10

Here are the top [301 comments](#) on this post. How many of them are from Pages set up to look like user accounts?

8 / 10

Nearly all of them are Pages posing as people - [294 of the 301](#). Half of the Pages were less than one-month old when they posted here; all of the Pages were less than a year old.

9 / 10

Facebook can shape our perception of public opinion - and reality.

But what we're seeing on this post, and many others, is a mirage.

10 / 10

Karimli told the Guardian that the attacks on Facebook from the YAP's "vast army of trolls" were part of a coordinated campaign by the government which included hacking his social media accounts and **blocking** him from accessing the internet.

"We have a very repressive regime. There are no independent newspapers or TV. The only way to express your opinion freely is via social media," he said. "So Facebook, Instagram and other platforms play a big role here. Facebook is popular because we don't have free information space."

Karimli said state officials had copied the idea of a troll factory from Russia. He estimated the regime employed about 10,000 full-time trolls. They were physically located in the capital Baku and spread out inside the youth branch of the YAP, as well as in the interior ministry and state-funded NGOs.

The trolls were easy to spot, he added, in a country which has around three million Facebook users. "They have no photos, no personal life. They open accounts just to troll me," he said.

After publication of this article, the YAP denied any connection to the Pages leaving harassing comments on the 6 March Azad Soz post.

The use of trolls to produce comments that praise the ruling party and criticize the opposition is "one of the social tools of authoritarianism", said a researcher who studies technology and dissent in the region. The Guardian agreed not to name the researcher because they have been the target of coordinated online harassment and abuse over their work.



▲ The troll operation's top targets include the most prominent critics of Aliyev, center. Photograph: Anadolu

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Despite this evidence that an authoritarian regime was violating Facebook's rules in order to suppress dissent - a situation which should have qualified the campaign for a CIB takedown - Facebook abandoned work on the investigation in March 2020, and only resumed it in August in response to complaints by Zhang inside the company.

A Facebook spokesperson, Liz Bourgeois, said: "We fundamentally disagree with Ms Zhang's characterization of our priorities and efforts to root out abuse on our platform.

"We investigated and publicly [shared our findings](#) about the takedown of this network in Azerbaijan last year. These investigations take time to understand the full scope of the deceptive activity so we don't enforce piecemeal and have confidence in our public attribution ... Like with other CIB takedowns, we continue to monitor and block their attempts to rebuild presence on our platform."

On Monday, the company said it had disabled more than 300 Pages identified by the Guardian for violating its policies against inauthentic behavior. It did not dispute Zhang's factual assertions about the Azerbaijan case. After publication of this article, Facebook said it had reviewed the list of Pages and had not found a link to the YAP. Facebook did not respond to further questions about the nature of its review.

By the time Facebook announced its takedown of more than 8,000 Facebook and Instagram accounts and Pages in October, Azerbaijan was [fighting a war](#) with Armenia over the disputed territory of Nagorno-Karabakh, which only increased the online abuse, according to Fatima Karimova, who runs Mikroskop Media with her husband, Javid. "We faced insults and threats, not just from trolls but also by ordinary people," she said.

The couple - both journalists - set up Mikroskop Media three years ago after fleeing Azerbaijan. They are currently based in Latvia.



▲ Ali Karimli and his supporters hold an unauthorized rally to demand the freedom of assembly in Baku, Azerbaijan, in 2019. Photograph: Aziz Karimov/Reuters

"Everybody knows these comments are from trolls. I don't know precisely how long it's been going on but it's certainly been visible for at least two years. We see it mainly on Facebook and Instagram, not on Twitter. Sometimes we post an infographic or video and there are 700 hostile comments."

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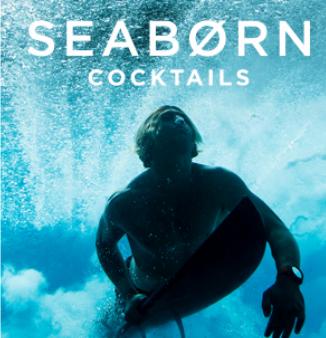


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The trolls take up their targets' time and energy, and they frequently make false reports that can result in journalists or bloggers having their social media accounts frozen, said Mehman Huseynov, an Azerbaijani blogger who was imprisoned for two years over his work exposing corruption.

"We can't fight this," Huseynov said by WhatsApp message, just two days after he had been again detained by police who he said attempted to hack into his phone. "[The] only thing we can do is just to block ... But it takes a lot of time."

One of the difficulties for Huseynov and other opposition bloggers and activists is that Facebook has not translated all of its tools and instructions into Azeri, making the process of reporting abuse or regaining access to frozen accounts especially onerous. Huseynov relies on assistance from international NGOs but said that it was difficult for less-established bloggers who don't have connections with such groups.

Facebook's slow response may have been in part hampered by this institutional blind spot. The company's vast workforce includes subject matter experts who specialize in understanding the political context in nations around the world, as well as policy staff who liaise with government officials. But Azerbaijan fell into a gap: neither the eastern European nor the Middle Eastern policy teams claimed responsibility for it, and no operations staff - either full-time or contract - spoke Azeri.

Still, the existence of Azerbaijan's state-backed troll farms was documented in English-language scholarship dating back to 2014 and a 2018 report by the US-based Institute for the Future. Indeed, the researcher said that they had repeatedly raised the issue with Facebook staff at conferences since 2012.

"The relevant people at Facebook have known about this for years and years," they said. "They should have known better and they should have paid more attention."

The degree of repression in Azerbaijan makes Facebook's failure to rein in the regime's rule-breaking all the more damaging, since Facebook is one of the only means for expression accessible to Azerbaijani internet users. "It's the one thing where government [has] no control," said Huseynov.

"Facebook cuts both ways in Azerbaijan," said Geybullayeva. "In one way, for the political opposition in Azerbaijan, Facebook is the place to organize and to get support for a specific issue. The dark side is, because this is happening in the open, it's also a way for the government to see what is being discussed and who is saying what. This is how people become targets. It's double-edged."

Geybullayeva said she had spotted Mark Zuckerberg in Budapest in 2013 or 2014 while she was attending a meeting on an internet freedom report. At the time she was enthusiastic about the social network. She said she tried to go up to him, to thank him for what Facebook was doing to make freedom of speech possible in her home country. "A bodyguard pushed me away," she said. "I'm always reminded of that encounter. It shows how uninterested Facebook is [in us]."

Asked what he would say to Zuckerberg, Karimli said: "First, I would thank him. Facebook facilitates public discussion. But repressive regimes with vast financial resources also use it to spread fake news. Facebook should speed up the time it takes to delete troll-generated content. They need to enact tough measures. And they should hire someone who speaks Azeri."

- This article was amended on 15 April to incorporate information from the YAP and Facebook provided after publication.

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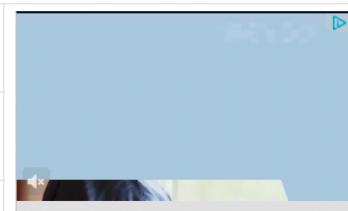
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