

# Meta closes nearly 9,000 Facebook and Instagram accounts linked to Chinese ‘Spamouflage’ foreign influence campaign

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Meta shut down close to 9,000 Facebook and Instagram accounts, groups and pages associated with a Chinese political spam network that had targeted users in Australia and other parts of the world, the company has revealed. Meta began investigating in 2019 and its research aligned with several research groups who coined the term Spamouflage, including the Australian Strategic Policy Institute (Aspi). In a report released by the social media giant on Tuesday, Meta said it had removed 7,704 Facebook accounts, 954 pages, 15 groups and 15 Instagram accounts identified as violating the company's inauthentic behaviour policy. About 560,000 accounts followed one or more of the pages, and Meta said the pages were likely acquired from spam operators. The campaign spent US\$3,500 (A\$5,430) in ads on Facebook. "This network originated in China and targeted many regions around the world, including Taiwan, the United States, Australia, the United Kingdom, Japan and global Chinese-speaking audiences," Meta said. The company said it uncovered the influence operation operating on more than 50 platforms and forums online including YouTube, TikTok, Reddit, Pinterest, Medium, Blogspot, Livejournal and the platform X, formerly known as Twitter – in addition to Instagram and Facebook. While the Spamouflage network was running across China, Meta was able to determine a large number of accounts appeared to be running from a shared location such as an office, with shift patterns such as bursts of activity in the morning and afternoon, Beijing time, with breaks for lunch and supper. Meta said the network typically posted positive commentary about China and Xinjiang province and criticisms of the US, western foreign policies and critics of the Chinese government, including journalists and researchers. The campaign shifted away from large platforms such as Facebook and Twitter on to the smaller sites after it was initially identified and blocked by the platforms in 2019. "Spamouflage made heavy use of Medium, X (aka Twitter), Reddit, YouTube, Vimeo and Soundcloud." Sometimes the post was completely unrelated to the other content on the site. On Quora, for example, in response to the question "How do I lose belly fat through weight lifting?" an account linked to the campaign replied with the article "Against Telecom & Online Fraud, Chinese Police Strengthening International Law Enforcement Cooperation". The report found the campaign had also posted on a Chinese diaspora forum focused on the Melbourne community. Meta said one of the big campaigns the operation ran was posts trying to claim the origin of Covid was the US, including a 66-page "research paper" the group published, which included consistently misspelling the name of key protagonists in the paper. The group then published two videos on YouTube and Vimeo to promote the paper, then created an article citing the

research and embedding the videos to claim the US had been “hiding the truth” about the origins of Covid. This article was then shared across forums including LiveJournal, Tumblr and Medium, and shared these links on social media. An Australian-focused article discovered by Meta is focused on criticising SBS’s 2021 decision to suspend broadcasts from Chinese state-run channels after complaints from human rights groups. Despite the large number of accounts and platforms used, Meta said the Spamouflage operation “consistently struggled to reach beyond its own (fake) echo chamber”. “Many comments on Spamouflage posts that we have observed came from other Spamouflage accounts trying to make it look like they were more popular than they were.” Meta blamed this in part due to poor quality control, and because many of the acquired pages were completely unrelated to what the campaign ultimately tried to post about. The campaign is one of five detailed in Meta’s quarterly report, with the others related to campaigns from Russia, Iran and Turkey. Aspi’s earlier report said the Chinese Communist party influence operations were probably conducted in parallel, if not collectively, by multiple Chinese party-state agencies – including the People’s Liberation Army’s strategic support force (PLASSF), the ministry of state security (MSS), the Central Propaganda Department, the ministry of public security (MPS) and the Cyberspace Administration of China (CAC) – which at times appeared to collaborate with private Chinese companies.