

## Seeing Double: Twitter Removes Network of Duplicate Accounts Cheerleading Mexican Political Allies

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## 1 Introduction

On December 2, 2021, Twitter announced that it had suspended a network of 276 accounts with ties to Mexico. Twitter stated that the network suspended contained inauthentic accounts that shared primarily civic content, in support of government initiatives related to public health and political parties. Twitter shared this network with the Stanford Internet Observatory on September 12, 2021. SIO's analysis found that the network of accounts engaged in some level of coordinated posting, handle switching, and cheerleading for the Mexican president. Many of the accounts showed support for brands and entities under the umbrella of the Mexican conglomerate Grupo Salinas, which is owned by Ricardo Salinas Pliego, an ally of López Obrador. Those accounts trolled some of both Salinas Pliego and López Obrador's opponents, and defended Grupo Salinas's justifications for keeping stores open during lockdown. The network activity was concentrated in 2019 and 2020, and did not show clear ties to political candidates or races in Mexico's 2021 midterm elections in our analysis, although we encourage further exploration.

### 1.1 Key Takeaways

- Several accounts created in 2011 for reality television shows were repurposed in 2020 to troll opponents of Salinas Pliego and López Obrador.
- Numerous accounts showed signs of coordination, including using similar display names, handles, and tweet text.
- Some accounts engaged in now common follower-growth tactics, but with minimal success—the median follower count across all 276 accounts was 58.5.

## 2 Background

Mexico's current president, Andrés Manuel López Obrador (known widely as AMLO), took office after a landslide victory in the 2018 presidential election. A leftist and populist from a new political party, AMLO beat out the candidates from Mexico's two establishment parties, and won an outright majority with 53% of the vote and the **largest vote margin** in over 30 years of Mexican presidential races. Although he ran in 2018 as a political outsider, he is a well-known political figure in Mexico, having served as the head of government for Mexico's Federal District from 2000–2006 and run for president in 2006 and 2012.

Despite his **popularity**, AMLO is a controversial figure. In his 2018 campaign, he pledged to be tough on corruption, but his **actions** since inauguration appear to have done little to change systemic issues. Similarly, he has done **little to curb** Mexico's ongoing issues with organized crime and violence. The economy has been **hit hard** by the COVID-19 pandemic. His critics have called him a "**power hungry demagogue**." In Mexico's 2021 midterm elections, an informal referendum

on his presidency, his party coalition maintained its simple majority but lost its supermajority in the legislature.

Online, AMLO's fervent supporters often post on social media using the hashtag #RedAMLO ('red' in Spanish means both internet and network). Opponents of the president use the hashtag #FRENAAA, an acronym for the **National Anti-AMLO Front**, a movement calling for AMLO's resignation. Many Twitter users who list affinity for the #RedAMLO network use typical follower growth behavior, including follow-for-follow and follower drives. A March 2021 [paper](#) by Raúl Anthony Olmedo-Néri ascribes two functions to these drives: increased network density and increased network visibility.

### 3 Summary Statistics

The network shared by Twitter contained 276 accounts that tweeted a total of 19,277 times. This was a relatively small and low engagement network, with an average of 72.7 tweets per account, but a median of just 31, and average engagement per tweet (calculated as the total number of quote tweets, retweets, replies and likes) of 1.99. Seventeen of the accounts were created before 2019, and the remaining 259 were created between July 2019 and December 2020. The tweet activity occurred largely in the period from the account creation spike in 2019 to the account suspensions in 2021.

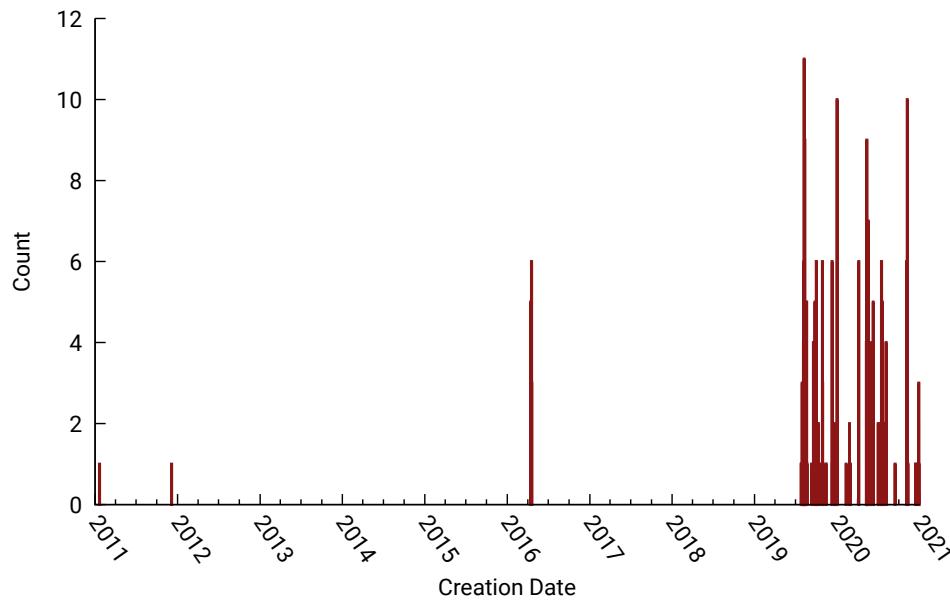


Figure 1: Accounts graphed by creation date.

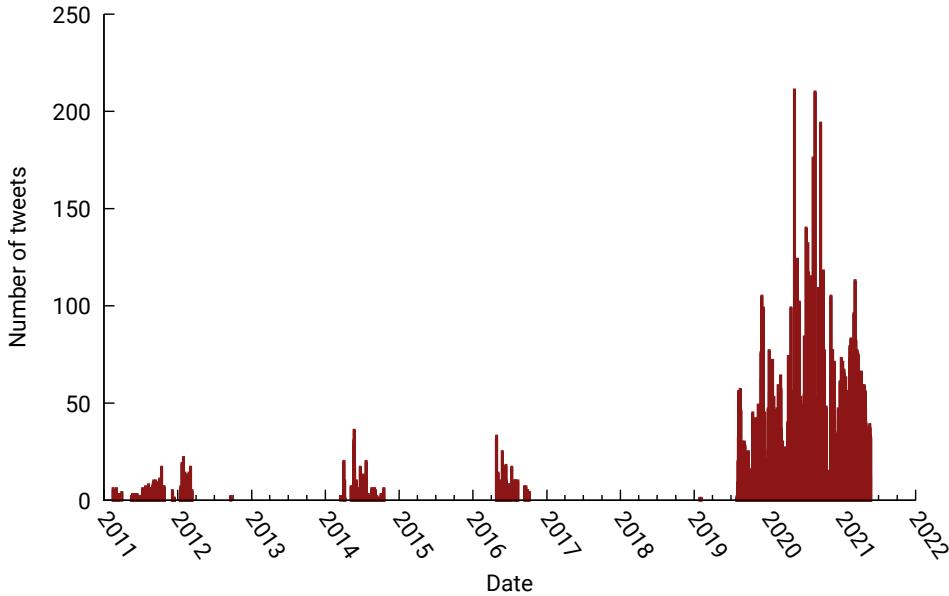


Figure 2: Tweets per day across the network from 2011–2021. The tweets prior to 2019 came from 16 accounts (77% from just two accounts).

### 3.1 Most-used Hashtags

The most-used hashtags in the dataset provide little information about overall network behavior. Four of the top five hashtags, #Elecciones2021 (#2021Elections, used 1187 times), #AlAire (#OnAir, used 271 times), #Elecciones2021MX (#2021ElectionsMexico, used 263 times) and #EleccionesMX (#MexicanElections, used 194 times) were all used by only one account, @PollsMX\_, an account sharing Mexican polling information. The account has since been restored and may have been included in the takedown erroneously. The fourth most used hashtag, #SoyTuDoble (#I'mYourDouble, used 220 times) was only used by the account @yamilekaim, in reference to a celebrity imitation television show in Mexico.

## 4 Themes and Tactics

Twitter’s attribution language suggests that the network posted content supportive of Mexican president Andrés Manuel López Obrador (AMLO) and his political party Morena. However, our analysis did not find a clear pattern of support for AMLO. The dataset contained a mix of political ideologies, though accounts that support different political opponents do not necessarily work at cross purposes. Thirty eight accounts’ profile descriptions use the anti-AMLO hashtag #FRENAAA while 86 accounts use hashtags supporting the Mexican president such as #RedAMLO, #AMLOlujodepresidente (AMLO deluxe president), #ProAMLO, and #YoConAMLO (I’m with AMLO) in their bios. Although presumably polarized, both pro- and anti-AMLO accounts in the dataset use similar tactics in the follower-building process and exhibit similar behavior after development.

#### **4.1 Ricardo Salinas Pliego Cheerleading Accounts**

The most-tagged Twitter account (with 694 mentions) in the dataset was @RicardoBSalinas, the Twitter account of Mexican billionaire Ricardo Salinas Pliego. Salinas Pliego is the third-richest individual in Mexico with an estimated net worth of **\$12.9 billion**. His properties and major business interests **include** the conglomerate Grupo Salinas, its subsidiaries the TV network TV Azteca, Banco Azteca, and the finance and retail store Grupo Elektra, as well as a range of other subsidiaries. Salinas Pliego is an **ally** of López Obrador and has served on his council of business advisors.

In May 2020, Salinas Pliego was criticized for his reaction to COVID-19 lockdown measures. After the Mexican health authorities issued a stay-at-home order, Salinas Pliego ordered his employees to **keep going to work** despite the national health emergency declared by the Mexican government. Reportedly, Grupo Salinas's manager of payments and payroll asked employees to **not criticize** the company as it could harm salaries. As Salinas Pliego and TV Azteca personalities pushed back against health restrictions, many of their competitors **complied** with stay-at-home orders.

The accounts in the takedown were overwhelmingly supportive of Ricardo Salinas Pliego. Salinas Pliego was mentioned by 134 accounts. The same number of accounts mentioned AMLO, making them both the most mentioned accounts, and many tweets mentioned both figures simultaneously. Salinas Pliego's corporation, @GrupoSalinas, had the fourth-highest number of user mentions.

#### **4.2 Accounts Find New Life**

While the majority of accounts in the dataset were created after 2019, two of the early accounts show signs of changing their Twitter handle and tone after long breaks in activity. Handle switching is a tactic that the Internet Observatory has **observed** in past takedowns. An old account (be it bought, stolen, or just rebranded) with established followers can lend more credibility to an account's posts or a campaign than a new account. The two accounts created in 2011, @vaqueropolitico and @yamilekaim, are the topmost and third-most followed accounts in the dataset. Both accounts appear to have originated as accounts for television shows on the TV Azteca network (owned by Grupo Salinas) and transitioned to posting political content in 2020.

#### **4.3 Difícil de Creer becomes Vaqueropolitico**

The account @vaqueropolitico (translation: politicalcowboy) appears to be the reappropriated account of a Mexican TV show on the TV Azteca network, Difícil De Creer (Hard to Believe). The account's tweets began on February 16, 2011. It tweeted multiple times per day using the hashtag #dificildecreer and often including links to the **Azteca America** website (most of those links now go to 404 pages). On August 12, 2011, the tweets advertised the launch of a Facebook Page, **Difícil de creer DDC**. The Page, for the TV Azteca branch in the

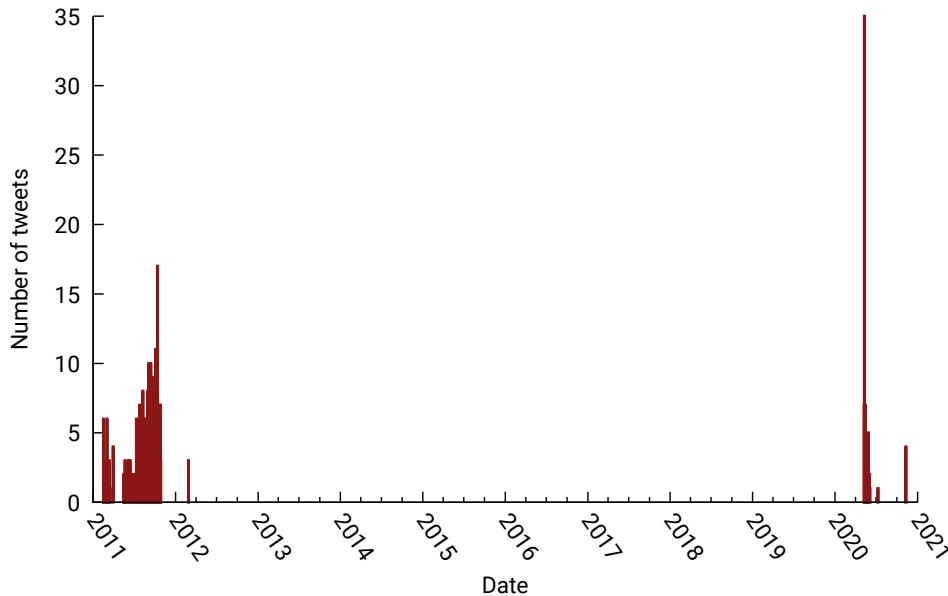


Figure 3: A time-series graph of the account @vaqueropolitico. The account was active in 2011 under the username @ddc\_aza, and again in 2020 under @vaqueropolitico.

United States, references an affiliated Twitter account: @ddc\_aza. The account @vaqueropolitico retweeted accounts that tagged @ddc\_aza 14 times in 2011. Twitter replies provide further indication that @vaqueropolitico originally used the handle @ddc\_aza.

On October 10, 2011, @vaqueropolitico tweeted “@K[redacted], How’s it going? Thank you for following us!” On Twitter, we identified a tweet from @K[redacted] replying to @vaqueropolitico that translates as “@ddc\_aza HELLO GOOD AFTERNOON I ALWAYS ENJOY WATCHING THE SHOW DDC” (see Figure 5 on the following page.) Numerous other observed tweets from active twitter users reply to tweets between 2011-2014 with their reply tweet naming the inactive account @ddc\_aza. Based on these exchange, we believe that sometime after 2012, the account @ddc\_aza changed its handle to @vaqueropolitico.

@vaqueropolitico went dormant from February 28, 2012 to May 5, 2020. After May 5, the content from the @vaqueropolitico account had a notably different tone. Tweets included profanity, and directly targeted various brands for violation of or adherence to lockdown measures.

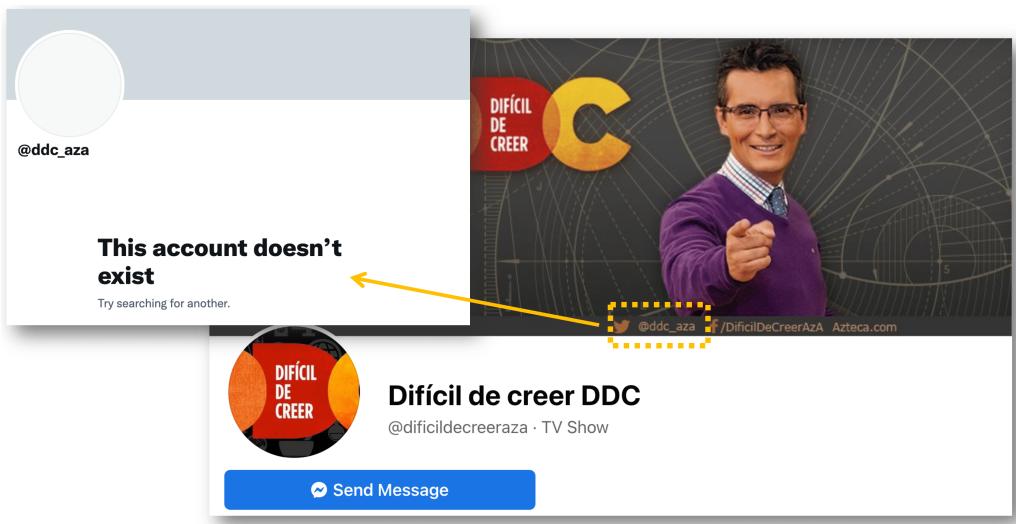


Figure 4: The Difícil De Creer Facebook page lists a twitter account, @ddc\_aza. As of the date of this report, that Twitter account does not exist—an indication of a deleted or renamed, rather than suspended, account.

Figure 5: A reply to a tweet from @vaqueropolitico indicating that the account previously used the handle @ddc\_aza.

Figure 6: On March 11, 2011, at 19:47 UTC, the account @vaqueropolitico and three other TV Azteca accounts simultaneously tweeted via the platform TweetDeck. Because TweetDeck allows for coordination across multiple accounts, it is likely that @ddc\_aza was managed jointly with other TV Azteca marketing efforts.

#### 4.4 Soy Tu Doble becomes Yamilekaim

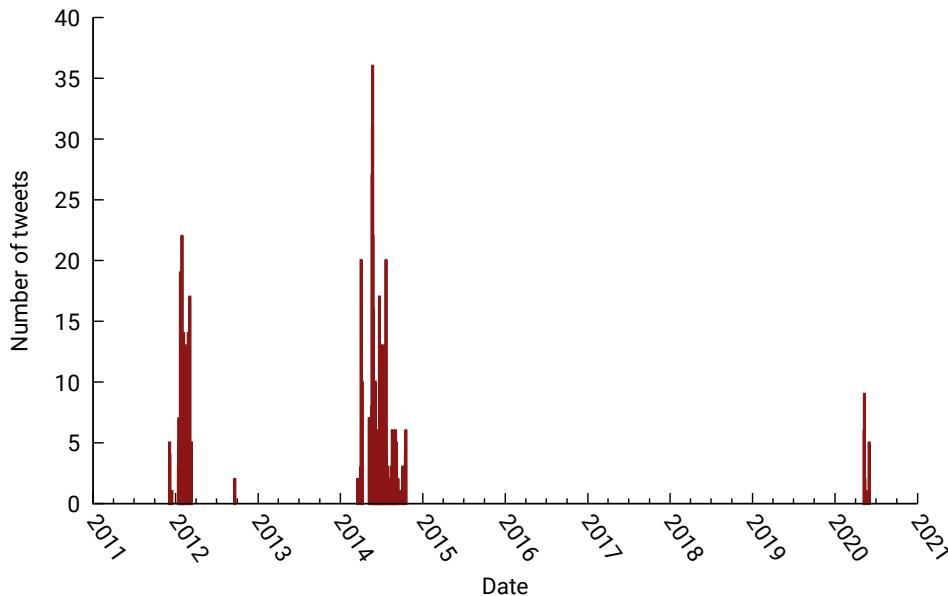


Figure 7: A graph of the tweets per day from the account @yamilekaim. The account tweeted during two seasons of the competition show “Soy Tu Doble” in 2012 and 2014. It had no activity between 2015 and 2020.

The Twitter user @yamilekaim follows a similar evolution to that of @vaqueropolitico: beginning as an Azteca America TV show and evolving into a politically active account. The account only tweeted 22 times as @yamilekaim before being suspended.

The account @Yamilekaim began tweeting on December 6, 2011 referencing Mi Nombre Es, an early name for the Mexican competition show that would eventually air as **Soy Tu Doble**. Between 2011 and 2014, the account tweeted 824 times about Azteca America TV shows, specifically Soy Tu Doble. Some time between October 10, 2014, and May 5, 2020, the account switched from the handle @soytdoble\_mex to @yamilekaim. @Soytdoble\_mex interacted with several TV Azteca verified accounts, including @AztecaUNO and @Azteca.

Twitter still shows replies to @yamilekaim under the URL for @soytdoble\_mex (see Figure 8 on the next page).

The 22 @yamilekaim tweets starting in 2020 defended Ricardo Salinas Pliego (as well as Salinas-owned properties like Elektra). For example, in a May 13 reply to another user, @yamilekaim wrote “Alllllll the stores sell non-essential items, look at la Comer with their May 10 promotion... but all they care about is Electra because they’re paying for a smear campaign against it” (translated from Spanish). In a more aggressive response to a tweet from Mexican author Sabina Berman, @yamilekaim tweeted “You are a miserable person, when they [TV Azteca] paid you well you shut your mouth, but now that they fired you, you’re acting all clean! No one believes you!” Berman had recently engaged in public debates with Salinas

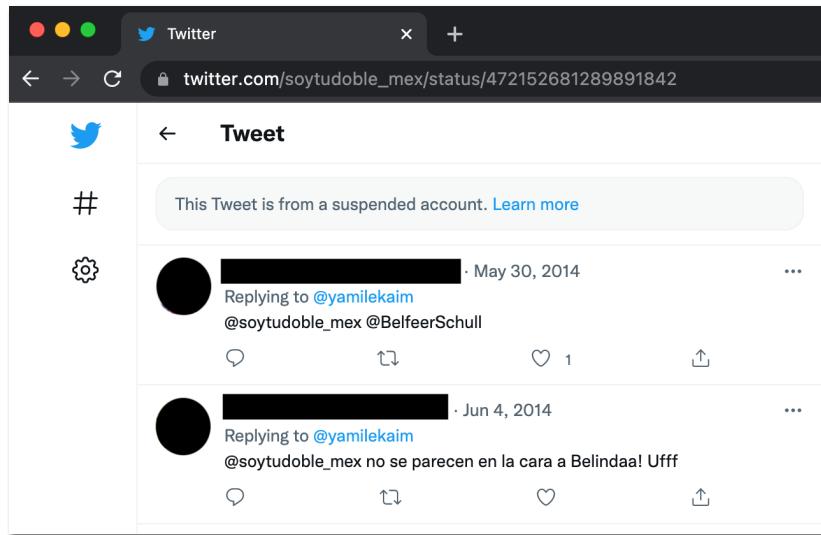


Figure 8: Two users reply to @soytdoble\_mex, which now shows as @yamilekaim (compare the URL to the “Replying to” field).

Pliego. The @yamilekaim account focused on similar defenses of Salinas-owned brands until it was suspended.

#### 4.5 The 2016 Accounts

The accounts created in 2016 were created over a six day period and all exhibited nearly identical behavior, often tweeting simultaneously.

After nearly six months of coordinated tweeting, the accounts went quiet on October 7, 2016. They resumed tweeting in January of 2019, tweeting similar, but no longer identical, content. Between May 10, 2020, and May 11, 2020, they promoted narratives favorable to Ricardo Salinas Pliego, similar to those seen from @vaqueropolitico and @yamilekaim.

Between May 10, 2020, and May 11, 2020, the accounts pushed narratives around the controversy that mitigated criticisms of Salinas Pliego. The accounts mostly called for rival companies to close due to the pandemic - especially Costco, Walmart, and Telmex, and attacked accounts that criticized Salinas Pliego.

#### 4.6 Parallel Behavior

Across this dataset’s 276 accounts, we identified at least 81 accounts that can be paired or grouped based on similar patterns in account creation, style, and tweet behavior. Accounts within each grouping share display and screen names differentiated only by minor spelling differences.

Usually, only one account in a family was active at any one time. For the pair of Xim\* Serrano accounts, @XimeSerrano12 posted its last tweet on December 9, and @Xim\_serrano became active on December 11, 2019. In this example, the @XimeSerrano12 account shared very little political content, mostly tweeting

Display Name	Screen Name	Creation Date	First Tweet	Last Tweet
Ximena Serrano	@Xim_serrano	12-11-2019	12-11-2019	03-03-2021
Xime Serrano	@XimeSerrano12	08-05-2019	08-05-2019	12-09-2019
Jorge Quintero	@j_quinteroq	08-06-2020	08-06-2020	08-12-2020
Jorge Quintero	@yorshquintito	09-26-2020	09-26-2019	11-15-2019
Mauricio Ceballos	@Mauri_Cballos	10-08-2020	10-08-2019	10-08-2019
Mauricio Ceballos	@MauriCBallos	11-07-2020	11-07-2020	03-29-2021
Mauricio Ceballos	@Maurici79074264	11-06-2020	[no tweets]	[no tweets]
Sahra V	@SaharaV2	09-09-2019	09-30-2019	12-09-2019
Sarha Villegas	@SarVillegas12	12-11-2019	12-11-2019	03-29-2021
Sarha Villegas	@SarhaVillegas	07-31-2019	07-31-2019	08-17-2019

about the TV Azteca show “Hernán”. The @Xim\_serrano account, on the other hand, was much more combative, with calls for politicians to resign and accusations of lying composing a high proportion of its tweets. This pattern carried over in at least 12 account pairings.

Most of the accounts that follow the pattern engaged in follower-growth activity at some point, tweeting at follow-for-follow accounts (“sigueme y te sigo” in Spanish). Many retweeted Juan Carlos Faesler (@JCarlosFaesler), an active twitter user with over 22,000 followers. Faesler has a YouTube channel called “La Voz Del Pueblo Noticias” (the People’s Voice News) in which he tells news stories from the perspective of a supporter of the Mexican President. Faesler would advertise follower drives for supporters of the Mexican president, where he would call on his followers to retweet and comment on posts in order to gain followers. Partly because of these drives, @JCarlosFaesler was mentioned 307 times in the takedown by 50 distinct accounts, making him the sixth-most mentioned account.

In total, 39 of the accounts identified as exhibiting the parallel structure were supportive of Ricardo Salinas Pliego, mentioning his account specifically. Many of the other accounts promoted awareness of Grupo Salinas products, including Banco Azteca, TV Azteca shows, and Grupo Elektra.

#### 4.7 Harassment of Denise Dresser and Sabina Berman

Two tagged accounts that should be mentioned specifically are the accounts for two Mexican authors, Denise Dresser (@DeniseDresserG, the third most-mentioned account measured by number of tweets and fifth-mentioned account by number of users tweeting at her, with 77 mentioning her) and Sabina Berman (@SabinaBerman, the 12th most tweeted account and the sixth most users, with 58 mentioning her). Accounts in the takedown directly attacked or harassed these two women.

**Denise Dresser** is a professor of political science at the Instituto Tecnológico Autónomo de México and writes a weekly column for the paper Reforma. **Sabina Berman** is a Mexican writer, journalist, and playwright, and used to host a TV show on TV Azteca. Both women have been involved in public disputes with Ricardo Salinas Pliego: Salinas Pliego once asked Berman how it felt to be his



Figure 9: A tweet from Juan Carlos Faesler advertising a follower drive. The tweet reads, “TODAY IS AUGUST 8, 2020 / May NO ONE who supports our PRESIDENT be left with fewer than 2000 FOLLOWERS / Ask them to follow and follow them back as well. / This is how we will remain more INFORMED and STRONGER / #WeareAmlovers #AMLOverNetwork #AMLOVENEWWORK #AMLONetwork #4T / RT and comment” (4T is a reference to the “Fourth Transformation,” part of López Obrador’s political agenda).

“slave” when she worked for TV Azteca, and Dresser criticized Salinas Pliego for his treatment of his employees during the COVID-19 pandemic.

An example of the attacks on @DeniseDresserG range from “I hope that someone stops your ravings, old madwoman!” by @drigal\_ma on July 7, 2020, to “Listen Ms. Denisse and there will someday be something that is right for you, something you like, something you haven’t been shown, bitter and arrogant, guess what it is?” Both @drigal\_ma and @MauriCBallos are included in the group of previously mentioned parallel behavior accounts.

The attacks on @SabinaBerman are similar. On May 13 of 2020, @Lord10Varos tweeted, “@sabinaberman Sabina how far you’ve fallen, before you never said anything bad about Grupo Salinas because they paid your rent and now every day from two to three publications... you make me think that before you were extorting them to not attack them.” On April 28, Xim\_serrano (a parallel-behavior account) tweeted, “Listen ma’am, didn’t you get paid for many years by that company? Are you bitter because they fired you? It seems kinda sleezy, your bitterness and hate.”



Figure 10: A reply to a retweet by Denise Dresser reads “The other virus is your face and your unfortunate power to write garbage and the WORST part is that there are people who believe you.”

## 5 Conclusion

The majority of the accounts in this takedown engaged in cheerleading for Mexican billionaire Ricardo Salinas Pliego and entities affiliated with his business conglomerate Grupo Salinas. A number of accounts used hashtags to indicate political allegiances in their bios, with pro-AMLO accounts approximately twice as represented as AMLO detractors. Accounts engaged with political follow-for-follow networks likely to build their follower counts. Two tactics particularly stood out in the takedown: the repurposing of accounts and the use of multiple accounts with similar names. The benefits of repurposing accounts are fairly obvious, as they provide access to preexisting audiences. New accounts with similar names could likely have been the done to create account redundancy in the case of Twitter suspensions or simply to facilitate rapid account creation.



*The Stanford Internet Observatory is a cross-disciplinary program of research, teaching and policy engagement for the study of abuse in current information technologies, with a focus on social media. The Stanford Internet Observatory was founded in 2019 to research the misuse of the internet to cause harm, formulate technical and policy responses, and teach the next generation how to avoid the mistakes of the past.*



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