

Reply-Guys Go Hunting: An Investigation into a U.S. Astroturfing Operation on Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram

Stanford Internet Observatory
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1 Summary

On October 6, 2020, Facebook took down a network of 200 accounts, 55 Pages, and 76 Instagram accounts. It attributed this network to a social media consultancy named Rally Forge, which appears to have counted among its clients two entities that additionally figure in this dataset: Inclusive Conservation Group (ICG), a 501(c)(3) private foundation that **describes** its focus as improving knowledge and understanding about sustainable natural resource conservation by empowering hunters and hunting groups; and Turning Point Action, a 501(c)(4) youth conservative organization affiliated with Turning Point USA. Facebook provided Stanford Internet Observatory with a subset of the data (196 accounts, 36 Pages, and 75 Instagram accounts). Based on an assessment of this material, it appears that Rally Forge was executing electoral and issue-based astroturfing campaigns, in which a combination of real and inauthentic accounts posted comments and replies to relevant conversational threads on multiple platforms, with the intent of creating the perception of a groundswell of public opinion on one side of a particular topic.

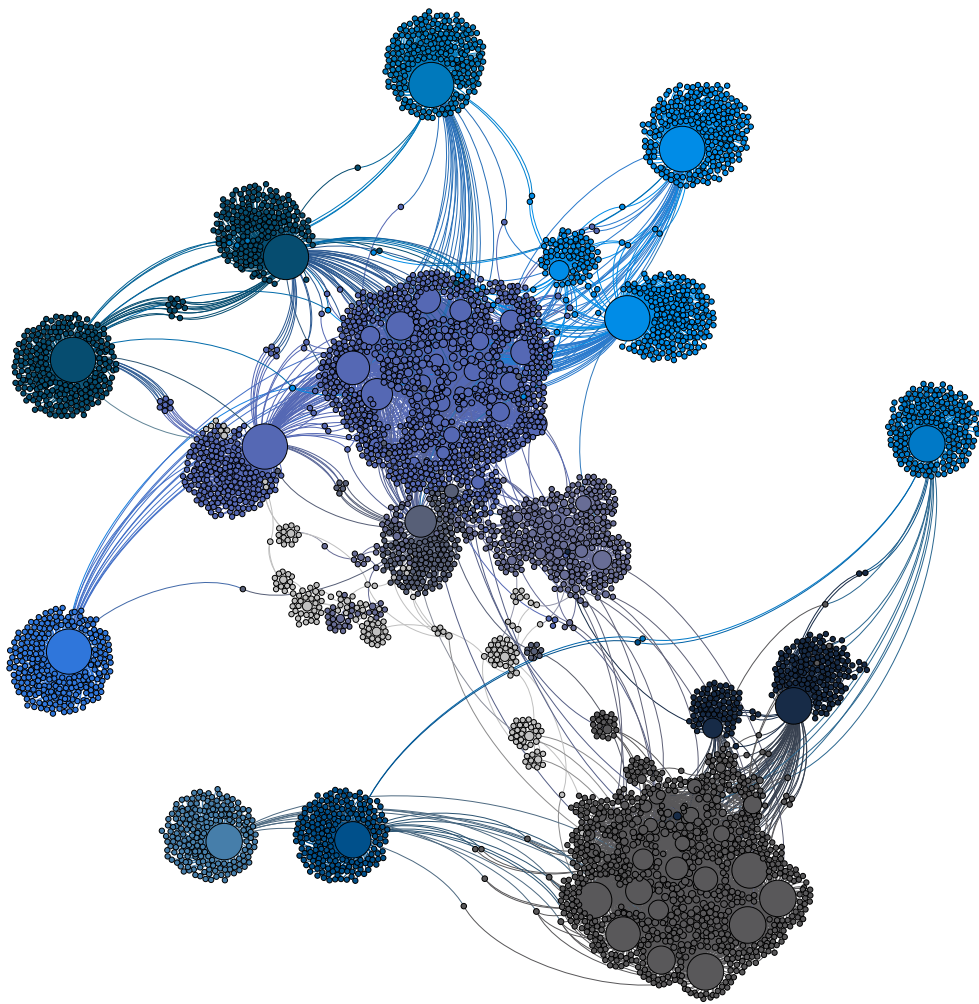


Figure 1: A visualization of the network across Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter. Twitter is the upper left, Instagram lower right, and Facebook the smaller cluster between them. Large nodes are individual actors in the network, and the small nodes surrounding them are “interests”—Pages and accounts that they follow. Accounts are increasingly likely to be “real” as they stray from the center of the clusters and have additional diverse interests. Subcommunities of the 3 major social networks, represented with different color, are inferred by modularity. For example, the two darkest colored clusters on the lower right are of Jake Hoffman and Andy Genasci.

1.1 Description of Dataset

The Pages and Instagram accounts were of varying sizes and reach: the combined 36 Facebook Pages had 300,161 followers as of October 10, 2020: four pages had over 35,000 likes and followers, eight Pages had between 100 and 1300 likes and followers, nine Pages had between 1-100 likes and followers, and thirteen Pages had zero likes and followers. Additionally, only three Pages (Proud American Hunter, Let Africa Live, and I Love My Country) were considered active by researchers at the time of analysis, which we define as making more than one post between July 2020 and October 2020.

The personal accounts of some of Rally Forge’s executive team, as well as some of ICG’s, were included in the takedown; this is in keeping with Facebook’s past actions against domestic American organizers of coordinated inauthentic behavior. Dozens of the other profiles appear to be fake sockpuppet personas with AI-generated profile pictures; we discuss the dynamics in Section 3 on page 7. Of the Facebook profiles, 37 had a presence on Instagram, though the accounts were primarily stubs that did not post any content.

While the initial network was provided to Stanford Internet Observatory by Facebook, we subsequently identified the presence of related assets on Twitter, which was also aware of a large percentage of the network and removed the accounts. The Twitter network we identified consisted of 37 distinct accounts, which in aggregate followed 4,037 total accounts. They were followed by a total of 1,439 other accounts. The network produced 8,275 tweets; the majority of those (7,173) were replies, along with 924 retweets. The median number of tweets per account was 126, maximum 920, and mean 224.

The accounts additionally had a presence on Instagram. The Instagram network was younger than the Twitter network, with many accounts activating primarily to promote hunting narratives in early August of 2019.¹ Fifteen accounts in the network were created on August 5th, 2019 alone, often minutes apart. Within ten days, 34 accounts in total were added to the network, with more following in subsequent months.

In addition to social network activity, Rally Forge and its leadership appear to have registered domains related to several of the major Pages in the takedown.

In this report we assess the tactics and techniques Rally Forge used to create faux-grassroots—also known as astroturf—inauthentic commentary about political issues and candidates. We additionally discuss the dynamics of the Pages and the narratives they promoted.

1.2 Key Takeaways

- Rally Forge-linked accounts engaged in astroturfing operations on multiple platforms, posting “vox populi” commentary about hunting or politics that appeared grassroots but was in fact paid commentary, much of it from people who do not exist.
- The fake accounts were operated over a period of several years, with a period of dormancy that appeared to coincide with the end of election

¹As creation dates are not immediately accessible via Instagram, this assumption is using the timestamp of the profile photo as a proxy for account creation date.

cycles. These fake accounts additionally pivoted in their expressed political beliefs and topical focus.

- Most of the Rally Forge-linked Page audiences were small, and comments that its personas left did not appear to generate much response. However, several of its Pages did achieve significant reach at their peak.

2 Background

Rally Forge is a social media consultancy headquartered in Arizona. Its website (rallyforge.com) describes it as a consultancy for movement-building: “Rally Forge grows movements from birth to epic.” The website does not include information about the team or its location. However, a presence on LinkedIn suggests it has been operational since approximately 2015, and its current President is **Jake Hoffman**, who is additionally a Councilman in Queen Creek Arizona and **a Republican candidate** for Arizona State House Legislative District 12.

Other Rally Forge employee LinkedIn profiles include job titles such as “Graphic Designer” and “Political Communications Specialist”. Some include descriptions of their work that sound like standard campaign consultant responsibilities: “Responsible for supporting national causes and candidates on behalf of client’s interests. Utilized political marketing and communications skills to help maintain message consistency across multiple digital assets including social media, targeted email campaigns and data mining.”

However, on September 15, 2020, the Washington Post **reported** that Rally Forge had been operating somewhat more aggressively than a typical social media consultancy in some of its work on behalf of conservative youth organization Turning Point Action, a **501(c)(4) political nonprofit** affiliated with Turning Point USA. The Post investigation described tactics in which teenagers operated fake accounts and **were paid to spam** Twitter, Instagram, and Facebook with identical messaging related to ongoing political campaigns, COVID-19, and other domestic issues. The investigation identified over 4,500 posts from the Rally Forge team, noting that it believed the posts to be a fraction of the overall effort. Experts who spoke to the Post likened the tactics used in these campaigns to a “troll farm”. Turning Point Action’s field director, Austin Smith, denied the claim, stating, “This is sincere political activism conducted by real people who passionately hold the beliefs they describe online, not an anonymous troll farm in Russia.” In an immediate response to the coverage, Twitter suspended at least 20 accounts and Facebook took some down and began an investigation. The October 6, 2020, takedown of Rally Forge assets by Facebook—the assets we describe in this report—is the result of that investigation.

Rally Forge has received media coverage related to campaign activities in the past. The entity has its own PAC, RallyPAC, which FEC records indicate was also founded and run by Jake Hoffman. At times, RallyPAC paid Rally Forge, including, for example, **\$316,634 in 2016**. Press coverage **from CNBC** in April 2019 surfaced a controversy tied to what appears to be that 2016 activity:

RallyPAC was funded solely by one billionaire bank executive; the \$300,000 in donations was used to finance “a conspiracy-theory-driven Facebook meme campaign to support Donald Trump during the 2016 campaign” according to CNBC coverage. Rally Forge placed the memes on a Facebook page that it controlled, “I Love My Country USA”; the CNBC coverage notes that it appears to have done the same thing for Turning Point USA, and that Hoffman claimed that his social media campaign “reached millions of voters” in the 2016 Presidential election. (Observations of CrowdTangle data for the Page support this claim; memes shared in November 2016 related to #drainTheSwamp did appear to have significant engagement; the extent to which they were boosted is unclear because ad data from the time is unavailable.) In additional coverage, Rally Forge and Turning Point Action were both implicated in a controversy about a group calling itself “Navajos for Trump” that ran billboards and newspaper-website ads in Arizona. **Local coverage from Navajo Times** noted that Rally Forge took out the ads, which were paid for by Turning Point Action; it wondered where the Navajos were, noting that the only online presence of “Navajos for Trump” appeared to be a still-active Facebook page created in December 2019.

Beyond election-related work and controversy, Facebook’s takedown links Rally Forge accounts to **astroturfing** campaigns—campaigns in which a message that appears to be driven by authentic grassroots energy is in fact sponsored by an undisclosed organization looking to sway public opinion (often a corporation, advertiser, or political entity). The activity related to ICG, an organization described by South African press as **pro-hunting lobbyists** that seems to have a minimal online presence (no website, no social media accounts), fits this definition. Freelance wildlife conservation writer **Jared Kukura** posted a series of articles to his site, Wild Things Initiative, documenting what he believed to be **suspicious social media** activity by the Inclusive Conservation Group. One of these articles included screenshots of what appears to be a July 2019 **grant application** from ICG secretary Andy Genasci, in which ICG plainly states that “under the banner of irregular warfare Inclusive Conservation Group has been conducting information operations,” reaching over 200 million people. It describes this outreach as “hacking the people on the network by driving ideas viral through a mix of likes, shares, and comments.” Kukura made no attribution beyond ICG, and does not appear to have been aware of Rally Forge’s involvement. We are not in a position to verify the authenticity of the grant application; however, two of the Pages mentioned in the application, and many of the suspicious accounts Kukura flagged, were included in the Rally Forge-attributed dataset that Facebook provided to Stanford Internet Observatory. In addition to the fake profiles, these included accounts belonging to Mr. Genasci and ICG leadership. Additionally it appears that Rally Forge leaders registered at least one domain connected to ICG’s efforts.

As Facebook notes in its attribution, it appears that Rally Forge did not commence with inauthentic behavior until 2018. We document and discuss the specific tactics that Rally Forge leveraged in Section 3 on the next page, and discuss its election-related and astroturfing activities in greater detail in Section 4 on page 17.

NETWORK CHRONOLOGY

July 7, 2016	• letafricalive.org and rallyforge.com registered by Jake Hoffman.
September 16, 2016	• “Humankind Society” and “Let Africa Live” Pages created.
July 27, 2017	• proudamericanhunter.com registered by Andy Genasci.
October 25, 2017	• proudamericanhunter.com transferred to Rally Forge.
July 5, 2018	• First identified account in the Twitter network tweets.
...	• Creation date of earliest known Facebook sockpuppet.
December 10, 2018	• All Twitter accounts go silent.
April 27, 2019	• “Proud American Hunter” Facebook page created
July 9, 2019	• Additional Facebook and Twitter sockpuppets are created.
...	• Tweets resume, with hunting narrative.
August 2, 2019	• First Instagram accounts created.
August 5, 2019	• Instagram accounts created more rapidly, many within minutes.
June 11, 2020	• First GAN-generated profile image accounts on Facebook.
June 12, 2020	• First GAN-generated profile images on Twitter.
June 15, 2020	• First GAN-generated profile images on Instagram.
June 16, 2020	• Last identified Twitter accounts created.
June 29, 2020	• All accounts in the Twitter dataset go silent.

3 Tactics, Techniques, and Procedures

3.1 Inauthentic Accounts

The primary inauthentic behavior observed in the Facebook-provided dataset, and in the accounts additionally identified on Twitter, is the use of fake and misleading accounts. Facebook removed 196 profiles in this takedown.

Although approximately a dozen were demonstrably authentic—including those belonging to the leadership of Rally Forge and ICG—the remainder were split between two types of accounts:

- Real accounts belonging to individuals who appear linked to the Turning Point Action paid-commenter behavior described in the Washington Post investigation. Several of these bear the real names of students in the Arizona area. A few appear to have been secondary “alt” accounts, a violation of Facebook policy.
- Fake accounts, many with either Bitmoji or AI-generated Facebook profiles. Some of these accounts appear to have been created in batches on the same date. Since we assess with high confidence that the batch-accounts are fake, we discuss several below.

Many of the Facebook accounts removed in the takedown had no personal photos; even accounts that appear to be linked to real people were stub profiles with minimal content that used an image of a sports team logo, celebrity, object, or stock photo.

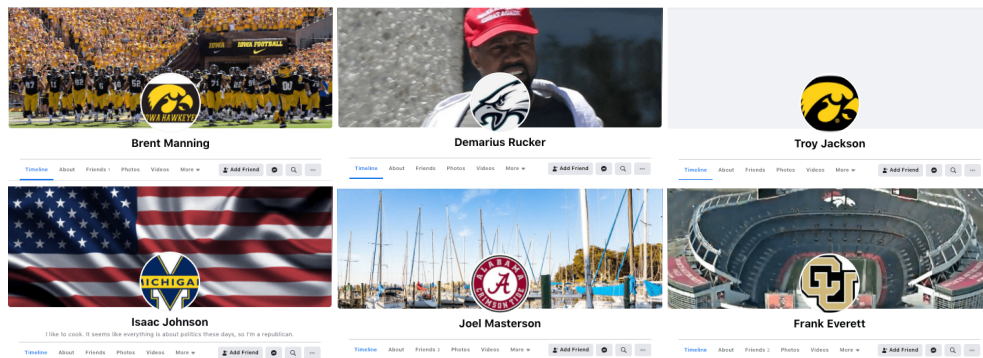


Figure 3: Examples of profile images used by accounts in the network.

Over a dozen accounts in the network used bitmojis as profile pictures. Characteristic of the user dataset, they likewise used non-identifying cover photos.

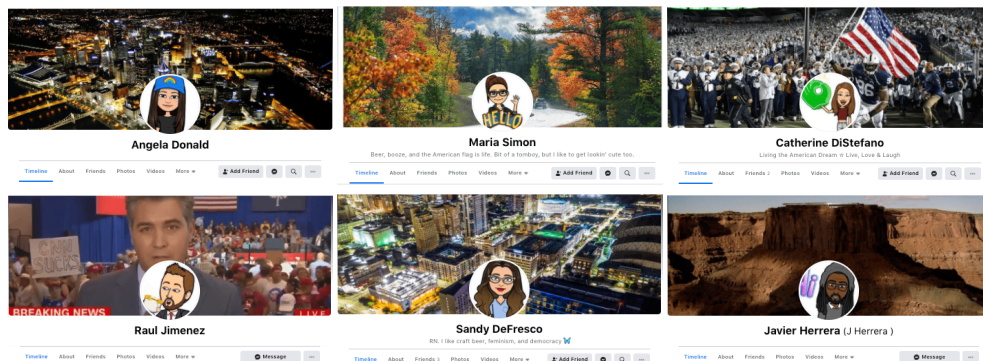


Figure 4: Examples of accounts using Bitmoji as profile pictures.

Other accounts used objects—political symbols such as flags and “resist” cartoons, as well as non-political objects ranging from animals to food

to instruments—for their profile pictures. Another common practice, not displayed here, was the use of celebrity photos.

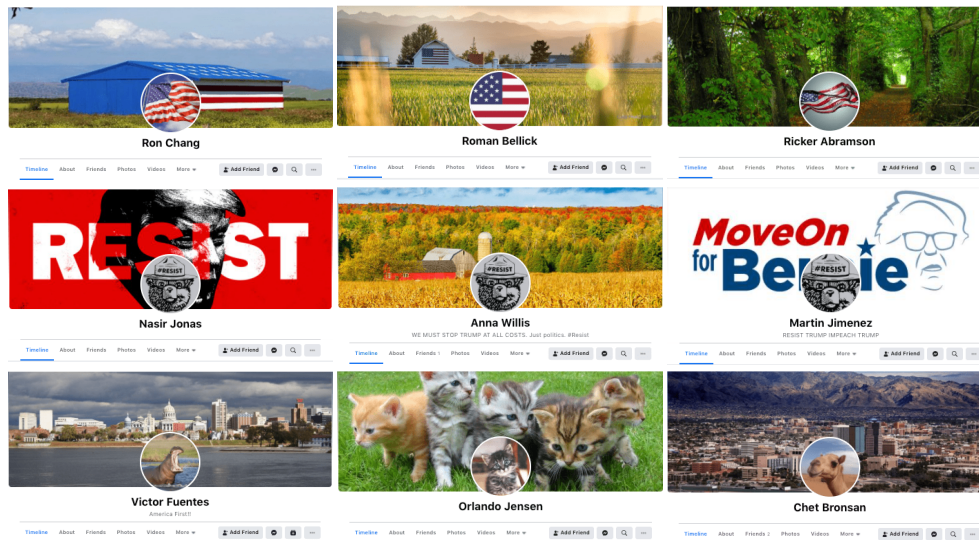


Figure 5: Examples of accounts in the network using flags, cartoon resist bears, and animals for profile pictures.

3.1.1 GAN-generated Profile Pictures

The use of artificial intelligence—specifically, generative adversarial networks (GANs)—to create profile pictures is increasingly common in information operations. As Graphika’s Ben Nimmo **quipped** in September 2020: “A year ago, this was a novelty. Now it feels like every operation we analyse tries this at least once.” Nimmo and his team at Graphika **noted** the use of AI-generated profile pictures in an operation attributed to individuals in China, while a Graphika-DFRLab collaboration **observed** GANs in an operation linked to “The Beauty of Life” and Epoch Media Group. GANs have significantly improved in their ability to create as-if images of human beings. However, as we illustrate below, GAN-generated images are far from perfect.

Several profile images in the dataset were pulled from photo generation websites that retain copies of the created images; reverse-image searching for several profile pictures in the dataset led us to “generated.photos”—a website that offers free photos as well as higher quality photos for a cost.

One of these appears to be the face of “Ricky Lee”, an account attributed to Rally Forge by Facebook. Ricky Lee’s profile picture is identical to one from generated.photos.

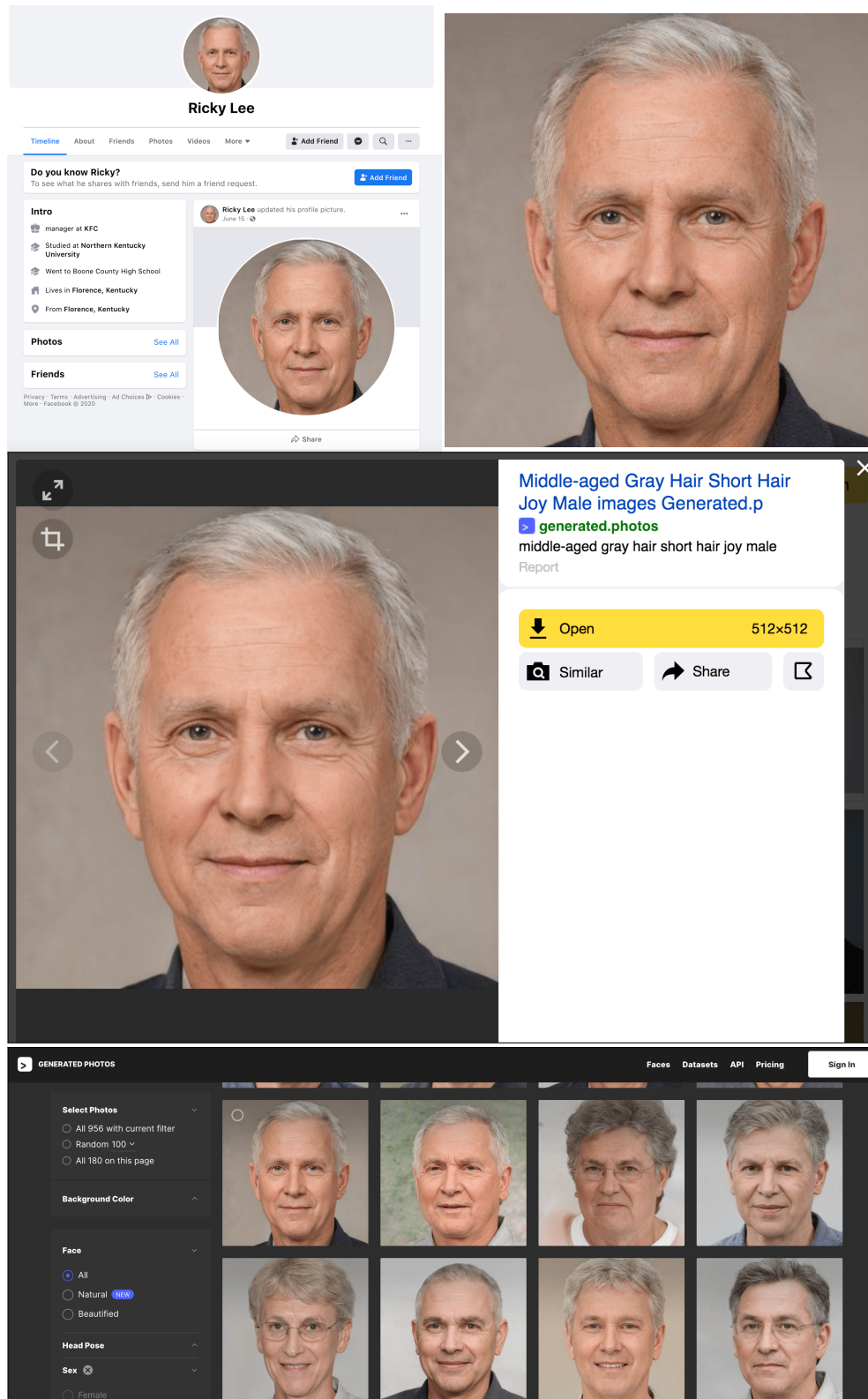


Figure 6: Screenshots of Ricky Lee’s Facebook Profile and profile picture, followed by a screenshot from Yandex.com directing us to generated.photos.

Reverse-image searching a second profile picture—from the “Jason Hoshizaki” account removed by Facebook—also produced an image from generated.photos. In this case, the face appears to be slightly different in coloring, perhaps

as a result of the application of a filter.

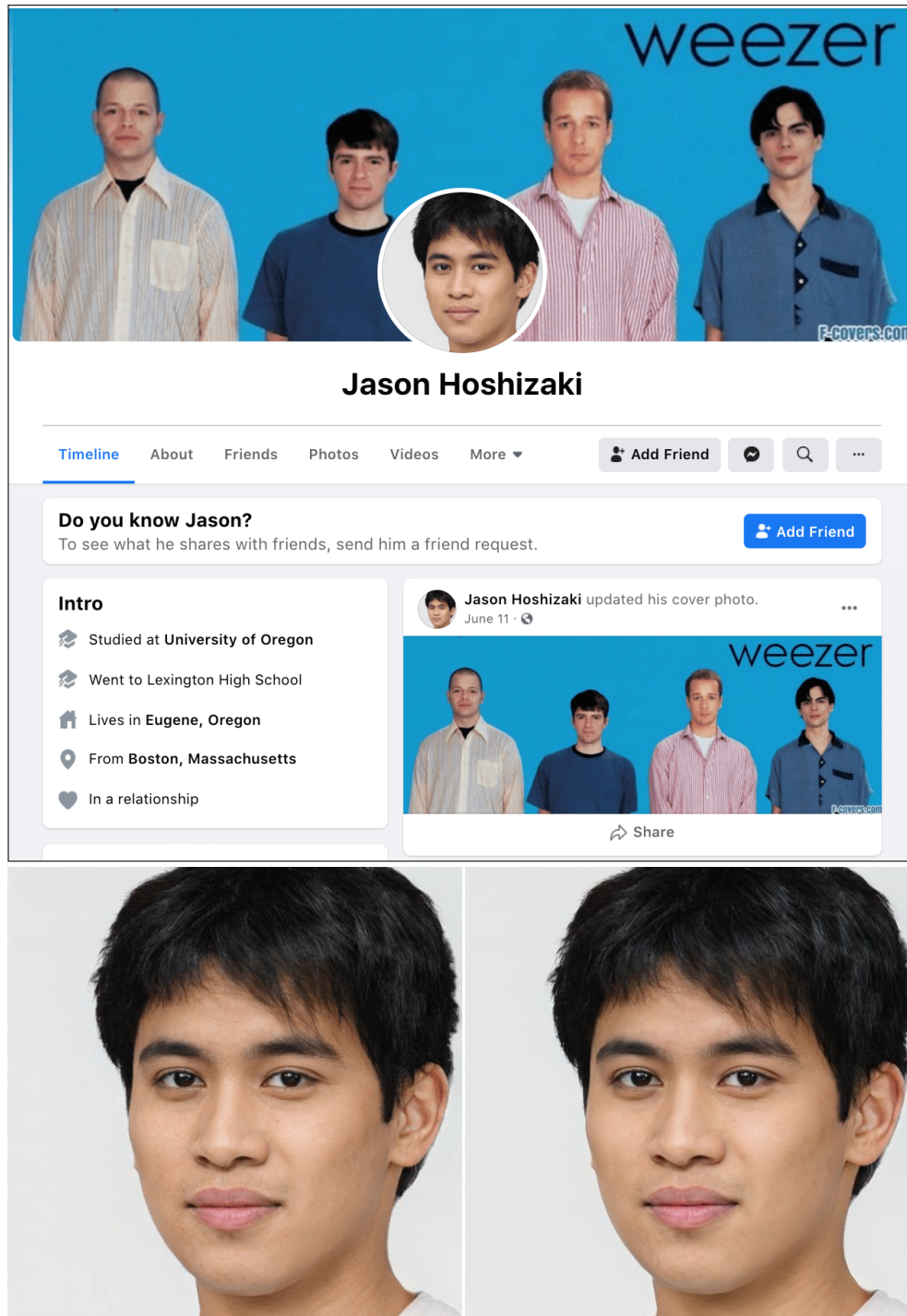


Figure 7: The “Jason Hoshizaki” account included in the Facebook takedown. Left: from profile picture; right, from generated.photos (photo)

We identified a number of pictures within the Facebook dataset that were seemingly sourced from generated.photos, and additional images not present on the site but bearing the artifacts traditionally observed in GAN-produced faces (irregular ears, glasses, collars).



Figure 8: Example of a GAN-generated profile picture used by an account in the takedown.

Finally, since images generated by the same entity often share facial-positioning similarities, we additionally overlaid the photos to compare **eye placement**:



Figure 9: Example of a GAN-generated profile picture overlaid in Photoshop.

These profile pictures appeared on Instagram and Twitter as well.



Figure 10: Example of a GAN-generated profile from the Facebook dataset also used on Twitter.

3.1.2 Repeated Cover Photos

In addition to indications of inauthenticity in the profile photos, we noted repeated cover photo usage across the accounts. In conjunction with the other signals noted above, the shared use of the same photo by multiple accounts within a short time period suggests inauthenticity.

For example, four users in the takedown dataset shared the same landscape cover photo. These accounts claimed to be from people living in Kenosha, Wisconsin; Chambersburg, Pennsylvania; San Antonio, Texas; and Cuilacán, Mexico (living in Milwaukee, Wisconsin). Their cover photos were all

posted between July and September 2018. We found a watermark from “www.elviskennedy.com” on the cover photos in all four cases. Although Kennedy’s website is no longer live, we found that this photo was used in a 2016 article on “Best Places to Live in Wisconsin,” citing Elvis Kennedy under a CC4.0 license, on livability.com (link).

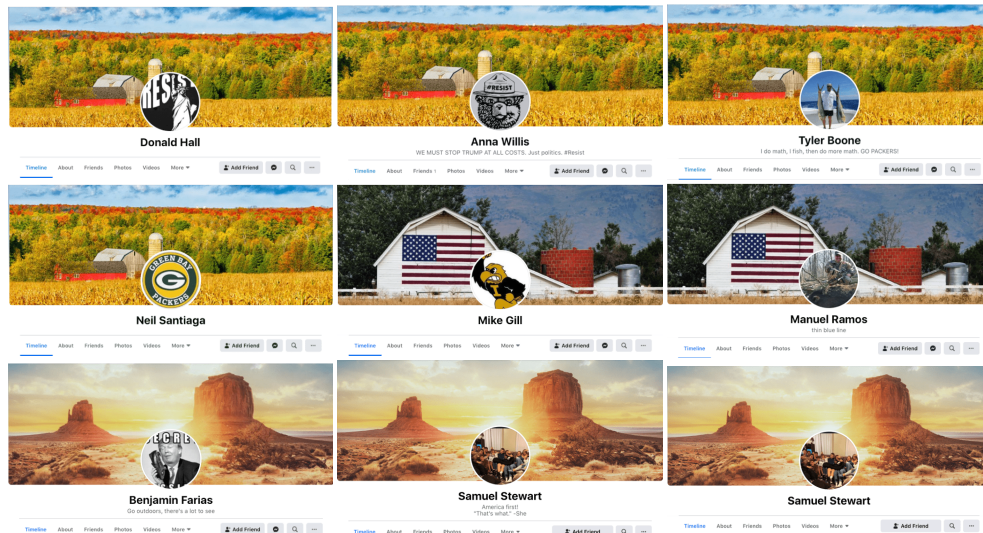


Figure 11: Examples of accounts in the takedown dataset using the same landscape images.

Other accounts shared identical cover photos that were overtly political in nature, such as the word “Resist” superimposed over President Trump, and “Move On for Bernie” next to a caricature of 2016 and 2020 Democratic presidential candidate Senator Bernie Sanders.

The “Resist” cover photos were added to two profiles on July 23 and July 24, 2018. The accounts claimed to be from Michigan and Pennsylvania, respectively. The two accounts that used the “Move On for Bernie” cover photos posted their photos on July 9 and July 12, 2018. They both claimed to be from Ames, Iowa.

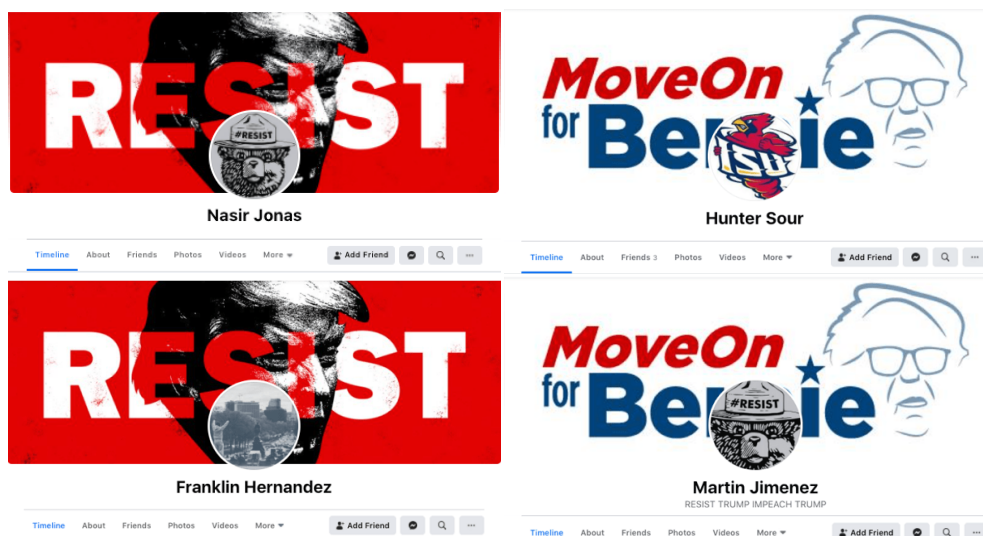


Figure 12: Examples of accounts in the takedown dataset using the same political cover photos.

3.2 Astroturf Commenting

Across all platforms, it appears that the primary use of the fake accounts was to leave comments about topics of concern to Rally Forge clients. We observed this extensively on Instagram and Twitter. Some of the profiles looked like conservative individuals, while others were designed to look like liberals. Twitter and Instagram accounts in the network followed prominent relevant political figures, influencers, environmental groups, and animal rights groups, and replied to their content. They also followed other accounts run by Rally Forge. Sometimes they engaged in conversation with each other. Interestingly, some of the political accounts were repurposed and used in hunting astroturf conversations after the political conversations they were part of died down.

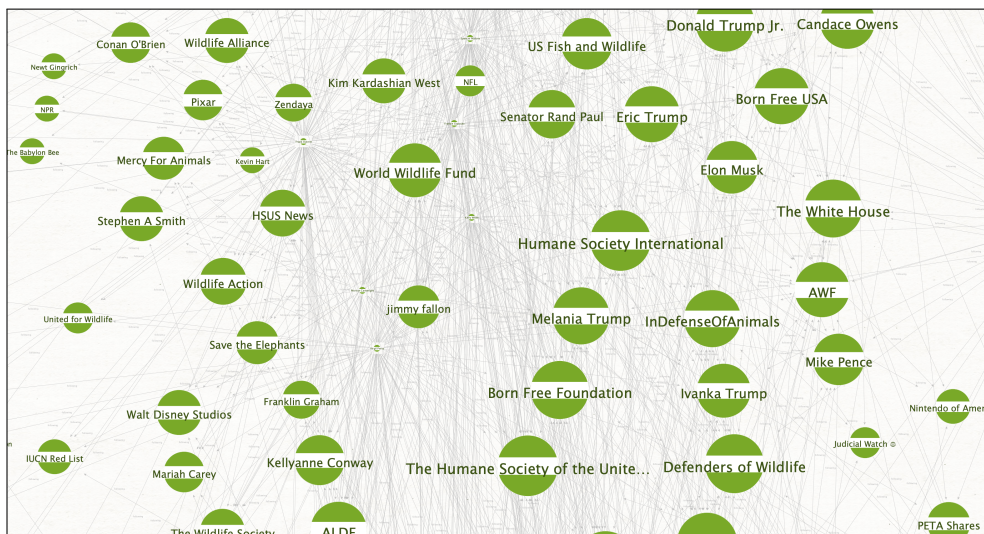


Figure 13: A sampling of accounts widely followed by the Twitter network. Graph made with Maltego

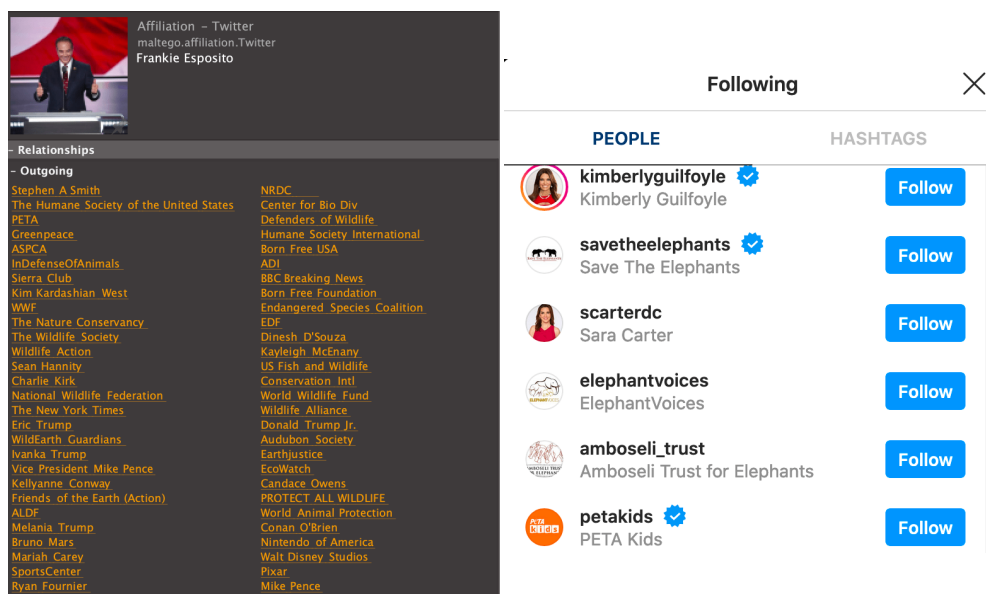


Figure 14: An example of accounts followed by Twitter and Instagram profiles



Figure 15: Two of the accounts identified by Facebook as being in the user network talk to each other on a post published by Let Africa Live, one of the ICG-related accounts in the network, driving up the appearance of engagement



Figure 16: An example of the fake accounts posting one of ICG's preferred narratives on a post by the Western Environmental Law Center. The comments claim that wolf populations are doing very well and hunting them is desirable.



Figure 17: Another pro-hunting Let Africa Live post, with comments emphasizing that hunting will fund conservation programs.

4 Content and Narratives

Facebook linked 55 Pages to the Rally Forge network; SIO examined 35. As described in the Background section, a majority of these Pages had minimal likes, followers, and content, and many of the Pages were inactive. We have categorized the Pages into six primary topic areas. Further description of the content, with a particular focus on the active Pages, are described in detail below.

- Hunting, wildlife, and humanitarianism Pages: pro-hunting Pages, publishing content from a wildlife conservation and humanitarian angle with pro-conservative, pro-Trump, pro-guns themes, as well as anti-liberal, anti-abortion, and anti-China narratives.
- Business and e-commerce Pages: wedding photography, t-shirt sales, and “e-commerce” Pages that had no discernible products.
- Libertarian politics: Pages publishing anti-government content, with some pro-immigration, pro-veteran, and pro-transgender themes.
- Political Activities: Pages dedicated to political activities, including real and fake political personas and pro-Trump, pro-Conservative, anti-Biden and anti-Democrat content
- Communist Pages: Pages with minimal content, using Communist imagery, particularly the hammer and sickle.
- Fake religious organizations: stub Pages for two fake religious organisations that contained no content.

4.1 Hunting, Wildlife & Humanitarianism

Facebook removed four Pages about hunting, wildlife, and conservation (Proud American Hunters, Humankind Society, Let Africa Live, and Hunters for Trump). These Pages promoted pro-hunting content, including so-called sustainable hunting practices in Africa. However, while the content is similar to many pro-hunting Pages, two of these Pages appear to have been used in conjunction with fake accounts to run an astroturfing operation. As described in the Background section of this report, conservationist writer Jared Kukra uncovered what appears to be a 2019 ICG grant request to Safari Club International, in which ICG applied for \$264,000 to help fund its “**non-branded educational Social Media Capability project**”. The **grant application** detailed how ICG would use what it describes as “irregular warfare” techniques to promote pro-hunting content on social media. The tactics described in the document include flooding conversations with comments and likes articulating a pro-hunting stance — and specifically reference Proud American Hunter and Let Africa Live. The grant application does not specifically mention creating fake personas. However, the example posts that appear in the grant request are similar to those in which we observed the behaviors described in the “Astroturf and False Flag Commenting” portion of Section 3 of this report.

Proud American Hunters, created in April 2017, describes itself as defending “the American heritage of hunting” and “rugged individualism.” With more than 100,000 likes and followers, Proud American Hunters is one of the largest Pages in the takedown. In its grant application to Safari Club International, ICG described the Proud American Hunters audience as comprising a “**rabid following of 25-54-year-old United States males who are passionate about hunting, guns and patriotism and very willing to defend our sport against anti-hunting extremist [sic].**” Some of the memes the Page produced broadly celebrate hunting culture as a family value that provides connection and memories for parents and children. Proud American Hunter also produced more political content that touched on a wide variety of topics, promoting pro-conservative, pro-Trump, and anti-liberal themes. The content at times delved into polarizing social issues including abortion, veganism or vegetarianism, pro-gun rights, and the effect of climate change on animal populations.





Figure 18: Examples of memes produced by the Proud American Hunter Page.

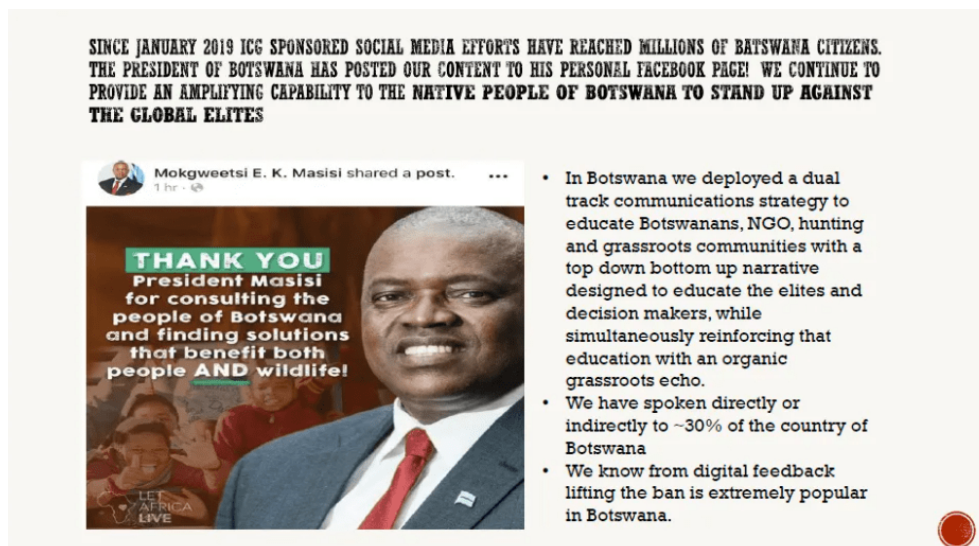
Based on the number of followers, Let Africa Live is the third largest Facebook Page in the takedown dataset, with more than 35,000 likes and 38,000 follows. It describes itself as “committed to ending the oppression of the African people by governments, NGO’s and corporations in Western Europe and America.” In its grant application to Safari Club International, ICG describes the Let Africa Live Page as having “a huge international following... [speaking] to the value of sustainable wildlife conservation in Africa through a native voice.” Using similar images and branding found on Humankind Society, Let Africa Live covers topics related to what its proponents refer to as sustainable hunting practices in Africa, where legal hunting can support wildlife conservation; the narratives also blend these practices with humanitarian advocacy, suggesting they help local African communities. The rhetoric Let Africa Live uses to promote these ideas often describe how liberals, the global elite, and conservation activists undermine wildlife conservation and the human rights of those living in Africa. Throughout 2020, Let Africa Live has also introduced anti-China narratives, particularly around COVID-19. These images described global NGOs as institutions using coronavirus narratives to undermine “legal” and “well-regulated” hunting in Africa.





Figure 19: Examples of memes produced by the Let Africa Live Page.

ICG claims its social media campaigns are effective at influencing individuals and driving political change. In 2019, ICG claimed to play a large role in creating and promoting content designed to lift a 2014 ban on elephant hunting in Botswana. In its grant application to Safari Club International, ICG describes how its efforts “reached millions of Batswana citizens” by deploying “a dual track communications strategy to educate Botswanans, NGO, hunting and grassroots communities with a top down bottom up narrative designed to educate the elites and decision makers, while simultaneously reinforcing that education with an organic grassroots echo.” ICG content was shared by the president of Botswana, who eventually repealed the 2014 elephant hunting ban. He was also awarded the **International Legislator of the Year Award at the 2020 Safari Club International Convention in Reno, Nevada.**



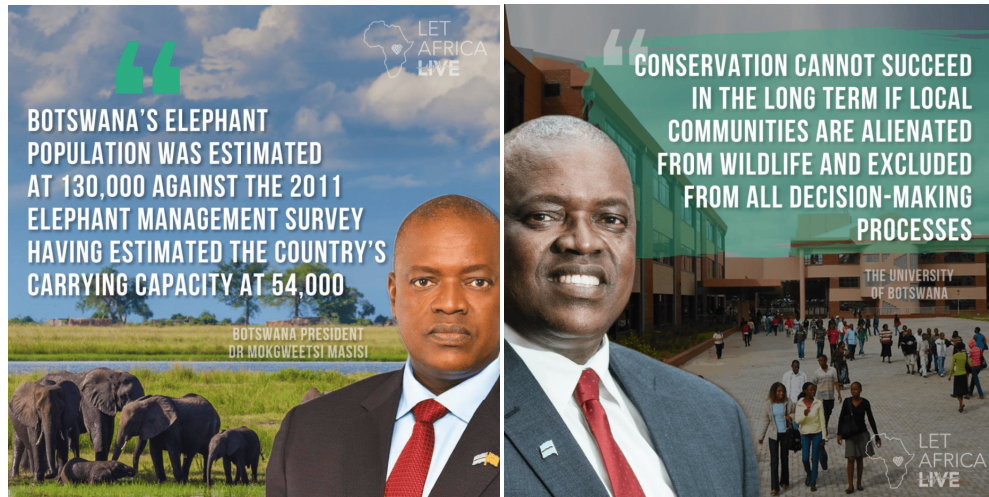
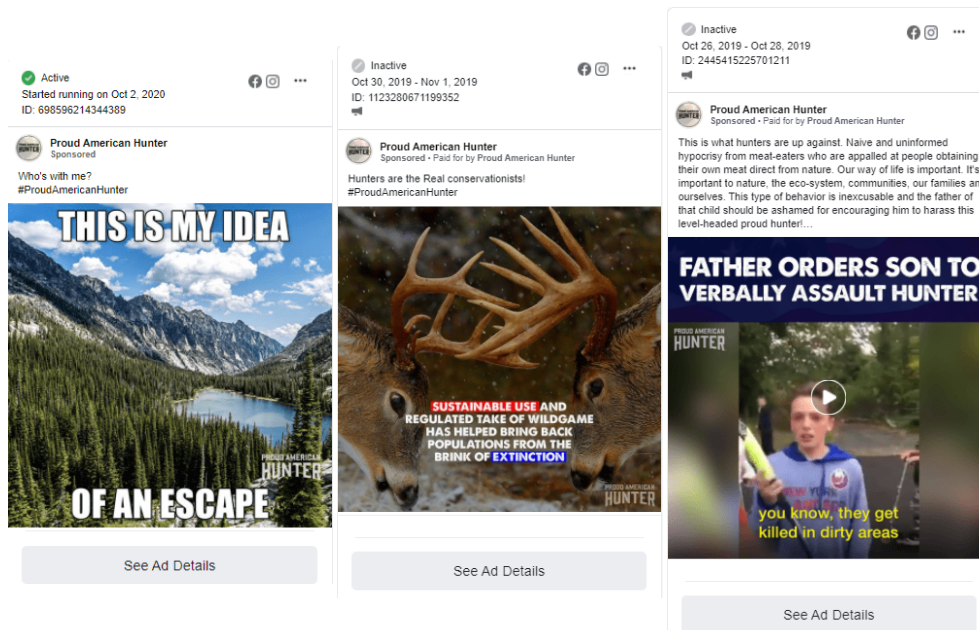


Figure 20: Top: meme created by ICG and shared by the President of Botswana. Bottom: examples of Botswana memes produced by the Let Africa Live Page.

Both Proud American Hunters and Let Africa Live purchased political advertisements on Facebook. From May 7, 2018, to September 28, 2020, Let Africa Live spent \$41,866. Proud American Hunters spent \$17,636 on political advertisements during the same time period. The advertisements reflected the same themes and narratives the Pages shared to their followers, with Let Africa Live focusing on issues mainly to do with legal hunting practices and conservation. In contrast, Proud American Hunters had a wider variety of political advertisements, some of which focused on legal hunting and conservation, but others that touched upon pro-hunting, pro-American content.



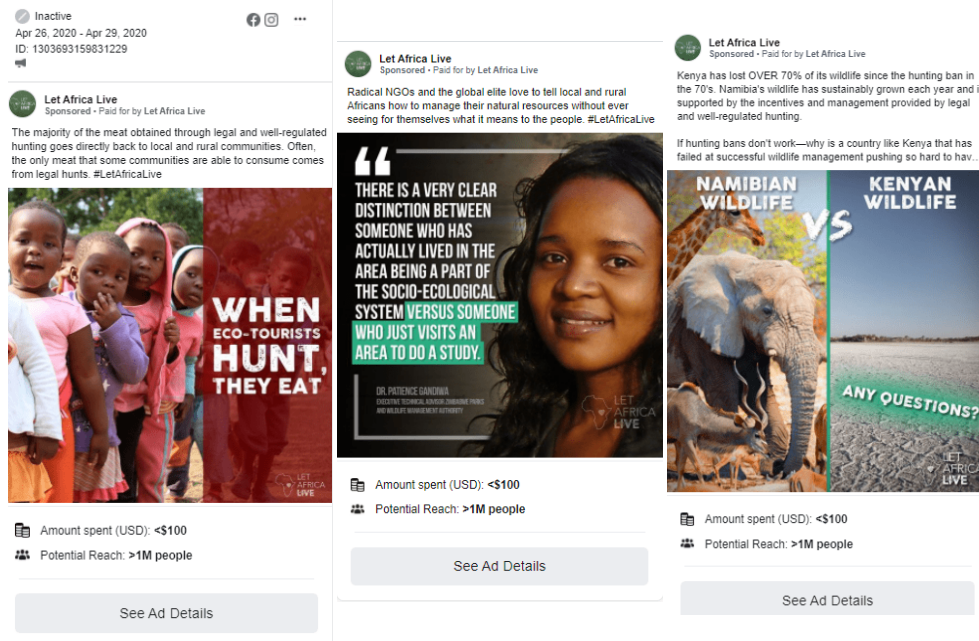


Figure 21: Examples of ads produced by the Proud American Hunter Page and the Let Africa Live Page.

In the 2019 ICG grant application to Safari Club International, ICG claimed to reach hundreds of millions of people with pro-hunting messages. Prior to its application, it claimed that Proud American Hunter reached over 122,000,000 people, and Let Africa Live reached almost 18,000,000. While we cannot access its dashboards, our historical analysis of its engagement levels using CrowdTangle suggests an average monthly interaction across all three Pages to be over 112,700 between October 2017 and September 2020.

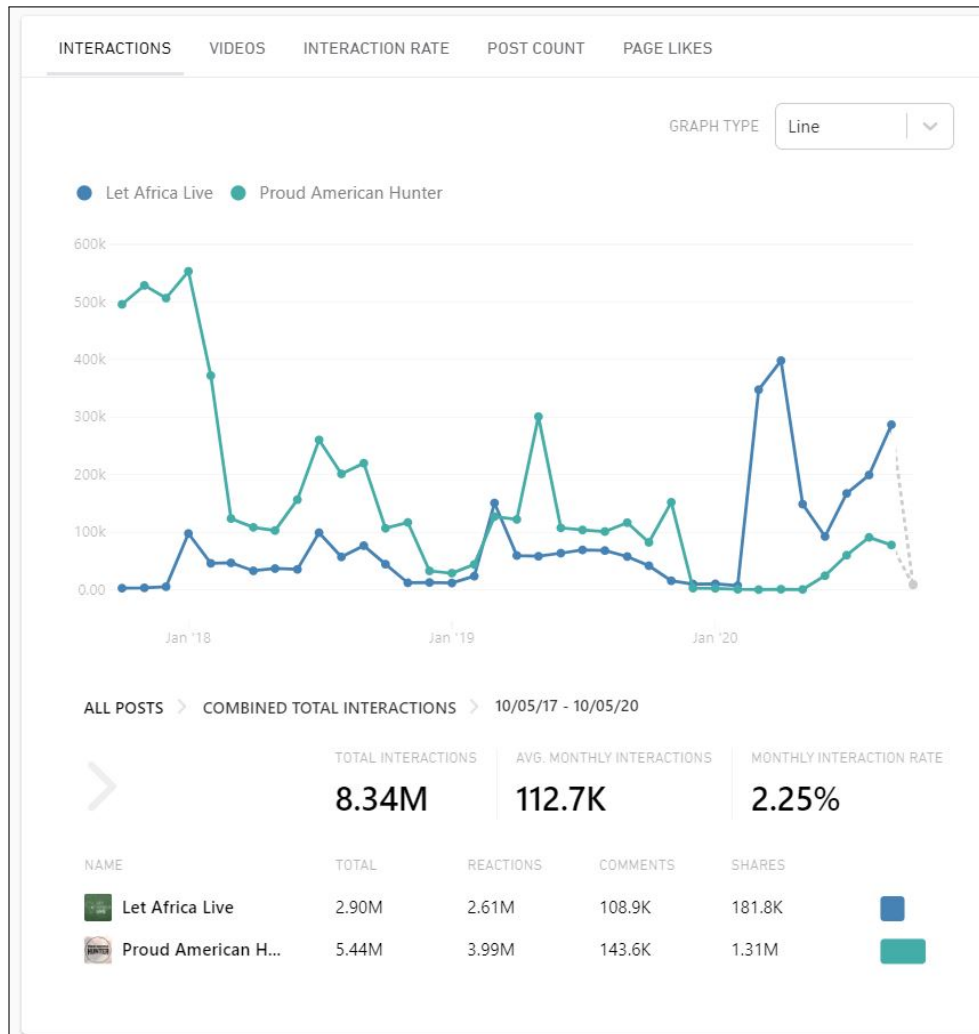


Figure 22: Engagement with the Proud American Hunger and Let Africa Live Pages from October 5, 2017, to October 5, 2020. (Source: CrowdTangle)

On Proud American Hunter, three of the five posts that received the most engagement were political in nature, rather than content promoting hunting as a family value. The post that received the most engagements (11,000 likes and 21,00 shares) over the two-year period was a video of a man pushing his way through a crowd of vegan protestors to order a burger. Other high-engagement posts included a meme promoting pro-gun values, and an anti-Joe Biden meme; two others mixed pro-hunting values with humor about dating and American family life.

On Let Africa Live, four out of the five highest-performing posts (which together received over 430,000 likes) were related to anti-China and coronavirus narratives. In particular, these posts promote the idea that COVID-19 is a global campaign designed to limit the consumption of wildlife, which will hurt Africans as well as animals.

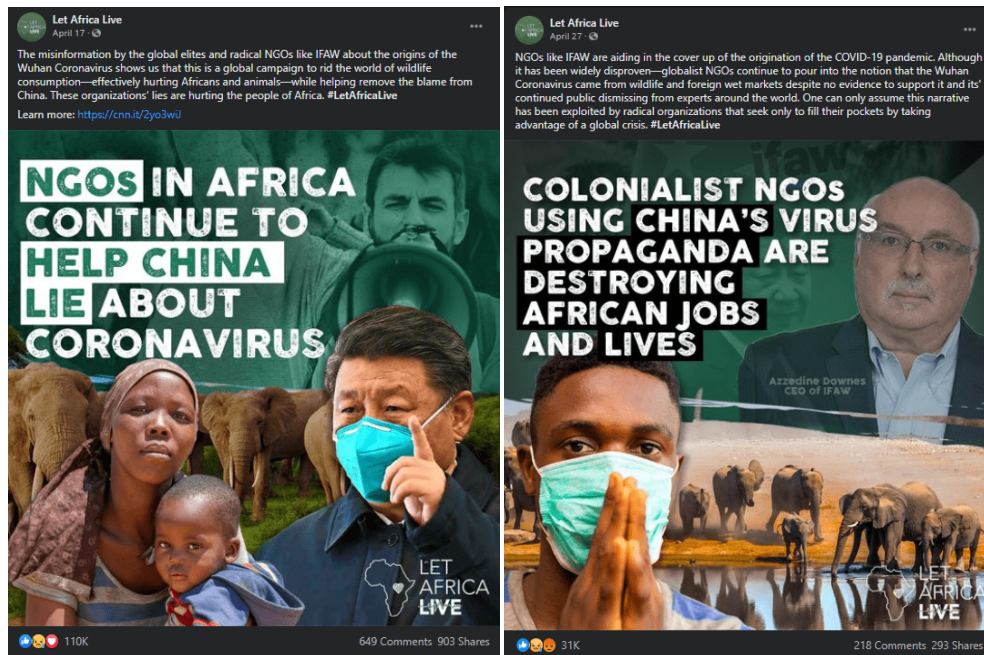


Figure 23: Examples of memes produced by the Let Africa Live Page related to COVID-19.

4.2 Business and E-commerce Pages

Facebook removed seven Pages claiming to be commercial services (Rally Forge, Chaselight Photography, Dizzy23 Photography, Spencer's E-Commerce Store, Bob's E-Commerce Store, Spencer's Garage, and Prickly Pear Wear). Most significantly, Rally Forge's Facebook Page was removed from the platform.

In addition to the Rally Forge Page, there were two photography businesses and an apparel company removed by Facebook (Dizzy23 Photography, Chaselight Photography, and Prickly Pear Wear). While these appear to be legitimate businesses, they are linked to the Rally Forge network because they were owned by a Rally Forge insider. The businesses list the same contact phone number, and some of the same content, and an April 18, 2014, post from Dizzy 23 Photography included a link to the Chaselight Photography Page with a note that it was the owner's new Page. In all three cases, the Pages provide URLs to external websites that no longer exist. We do not believe that these business Pages were exhibiting coordinated inauthentic behavior, but rather that they were removed because of their owner's significant involvement in Rally Forge's inauthentic Facebook activity.

Finally, three of the Pages that were removed by Facebook were nearly-empty services Pages (Bob's E-Commerce Store, Spencer's E-Commerce Store, and Spencer's Garage). These Pages do not include any posts or information, with the exception of profile and cover photos. Bob's E-Commerce Store and Spencer's E-commerce Store share identical profile and cover photos, which were posted on September 23 and September 24, 2019, respectively. The three Pages also use stolen stock image photos from unsplash.com for their content.

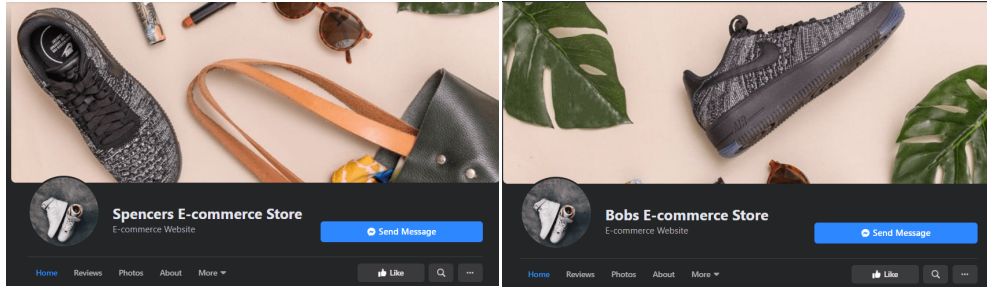


Figure 24: Spencers E-commerce Store, Bobs E-commerce Store Page cover photos, using stolen photos from unsplash.com. (unsplash photo)

4.3 Libertarian Politics

Facebook removed seven Pages promoting libertarian politics (Libertarian Party Insurrection Caucus, Ministry of Liberty Memes, Justin Amash’s Conservative Holier-Than-Thou Meme Committee, The Liberty Insurgency, The Libertarian Humanist, Pragdacious Libertarianism, and The Pragdacious Libertarian). These Pages generally shared anti-government, pro-immigration, and pro-veteran content. None of the libertarian politics Pages were actively producing content after July 2020.

The most popular Page (in terms of likes and followers) was The Libertarian Humanist, which had 422 likes and 427 followers. Although it has not posted content since February 2020, topics included anti-government, pro-immigration, and anti-Trump content.

Justin Amash’s Conservative Holier-Than-Thou Meme Committee had the second-largest follower count with 28 followers. The Page, created on April 30, 2020, created and shared memes making fun of Justin Amash, who was a Republican until 2020 when he joined the Libertarian political party.

The Liberty Insurgency was the third-largest libertarian-themed Page removed by Facebook, with 17 likes and 17 followers. Like the other Pages in this category, The Liberty Insurgency shared anti-government content, some of which had pro-veteran themes. This Page was created in December 2019, but did not post or share any content after January 6, 2020. Interestingly, the Page also shared content from Iran’s state-sponsored media outlet, PressTV.

The Ministry of Liberty Memes was the smallest libertarian-theme Page removed by Facebook, with three likes and three followers. It shared anti-government memes, as well as memes that promoted pro-transgender rights. It was created on April 8, 2019, but did not post or share any content after its creation date.

Finally, three Pages had no content, likes, or follows (Pragdacious Libertarianism, The Pragdacious Libertarian, and Libertarian Party Insurrection Caucus). Both Pragdacious Libertarianism and The Pragdacious Libertarian were created on November 15, 2019. The Libertarian Party Insurrection Caucus was created on February 20, 2020.

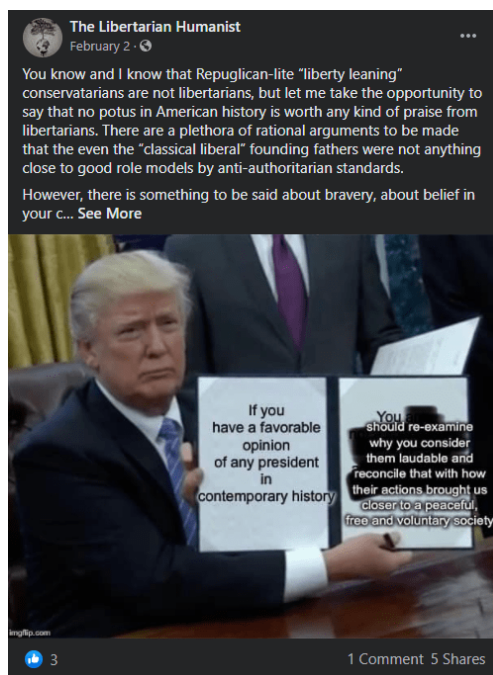


Figure 25: Examples of memes produced by libertarian Page.

4.4 Political Activities

The political Pages attributed to Rally Forge appear to have encompassed several strategies. The largest, I Love My Country, was referenced in past press coverage as a dissemination space for work related to conservative clients. This Page had 120,111 followers. I Love My Country posted memes promoting pro-Trump, pro-Conservative, anti-Biden, and anti-Democrat narratives. More recently, some of these memes have promoted President Trump's statements about "ballot scams", while others have focused on highly polarizing political issues such as the ongoing Black Lives Matters Protests throughout the United States. It is important to reiterate that this and other political Pages came down because of their affiliation with Rally Forge and the consultancy's overall inauthentic behavior, not because of the messaging contained in the memes.

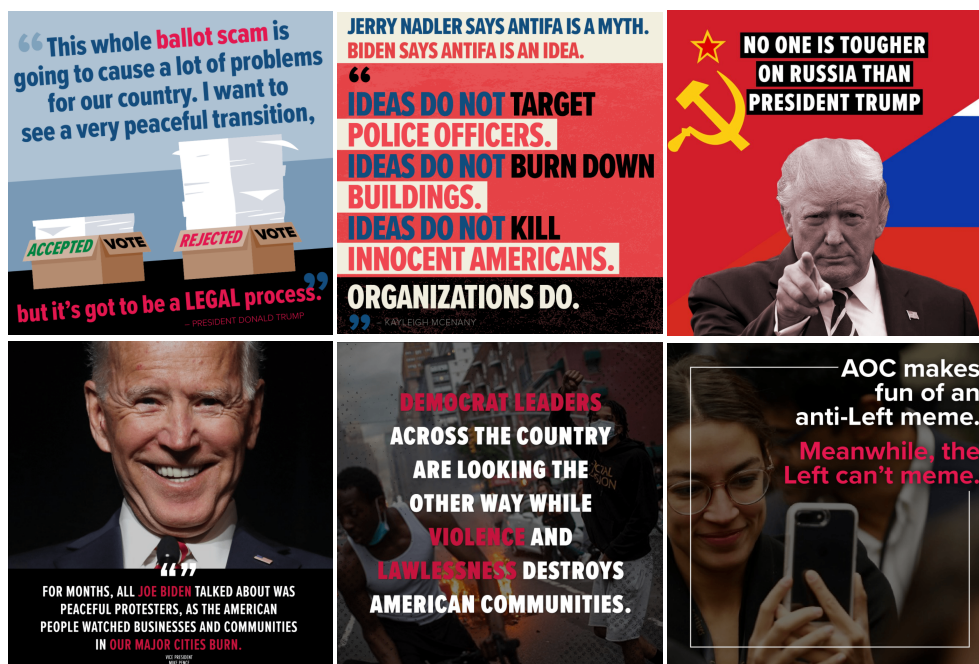


Figure 26: Examples of memes produced by the I Love My Country Page.

I Love My Country also purchased \$2000 worth of political advertisements in August and November 2018. One political advertisement appears to be recruiting individuals to "expose idiotic government regulations". Of the other two advertisements, one ad focuses on promoting Conservative candidates in Wyoming, while the other advertisement features a video that uses anti-Liberal and anti-Black Lives Matter movement language.



Figure 27: Examples of ads produced by the I Love My Country Page.

The top-5 most liked posts on the I Love My Country Page were produced in 2016, promoting the Trump Campaign by using pro-Trump and anti-Clinton hashtags, narratives, and rhetoric. In 2020, the top-5 most liked posts on the Page promoted pro-Trump anti-Liberal rhetoric, but they have not generated as much engagement as the material produced in the lead-up to the 2016 US Presidential Elections.

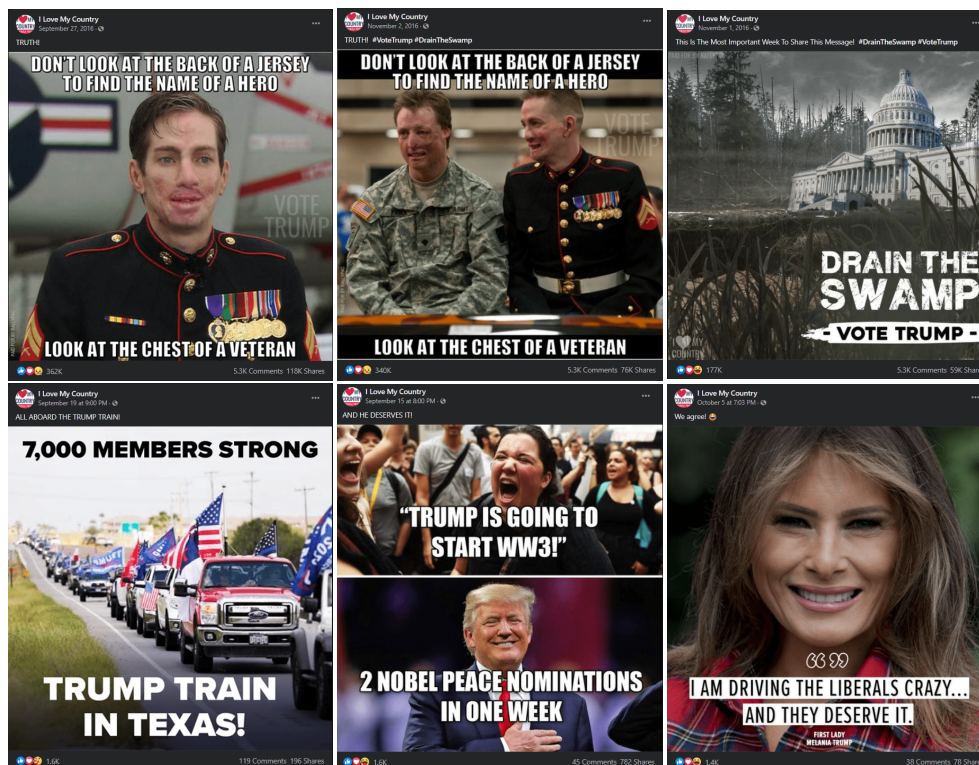


Figure 28: Top: Examples of memes produced by the I Love My Country Page in 2016. Bottom: Examples of memes produced by the I Love My Country Page in 2020.

Other political Pages were associated with individual politicians – including

one fake political personas. The fake politician persona was Randall Sand, who described himself on his campaign website as an Independent Candidate for Arizona's Fifth Congressional District. His Twitter Page similarly lists him as an "Former Independent Congressional write-in candidate." Sand's Facebook presence used a photo of film director Derrick Acosta, and posted a doctored image of a Derrick Acosta interview. The Page also shared several doctored images of news story headlines purporting to be from local press featuring Randall Sand; however, the articles do not appear to exist on the newspaper sites. The motivations behind creating a fake political persona are unclear, and range from innocuous (such as Borat-style satire, or entertainment) to more manipulative (a fake candidate for a write-in campaign).

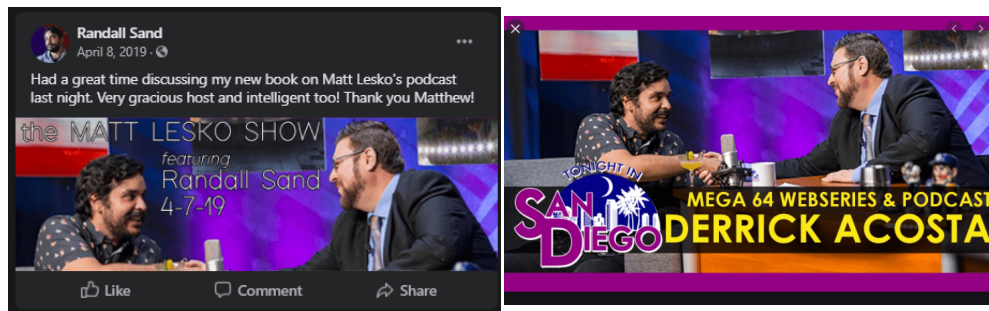


Figure 29: Left: A doctored image purporting to show an interview with Randall Sand. Right: The original photo of an interview with the director Derrick Acosta

Another Page in this group appeared to be related to real politician Mickey Dunn. It had 567 likes and 575 followers. Dunn's personal profile was removed in the takedown. The content on Dunn's Page focused largely on pro-Texas themes, with posts calling for limits on political terms to end career politicians in Texas. Dunn also purchased \$7,186 worth of advertisements between May 7, 2018, and September 28, 2020, targeting voters with pro-gun and pro-term limit messaging.

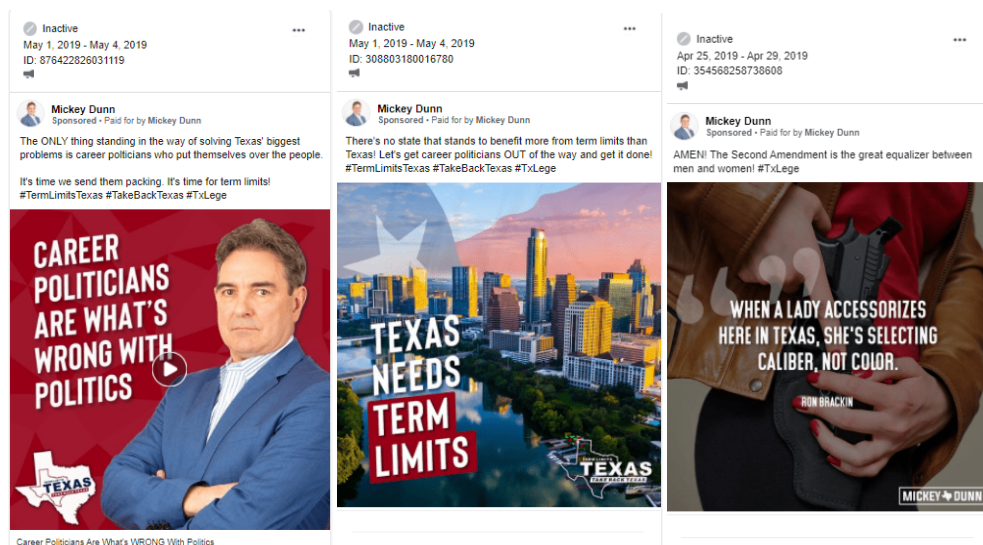


Figure 30: Examples of ads produced by the Mickey Dunn Page.

4.5 Communist Pages

Facebook removed two Pages that used communist imagery and satire in their content (Communo-Capitalism and Komyoonizm). Both Pages, created on April 2, 2019, feature brightly colored images with the hammer and sickle. Communo-Capitalism has 18 likes and 20 followers, and Komyoonizm has 300 likes and 301 followers. Most of the activity on these Pages occurred the day they were created, when the Pages uploaded various versions of their profile picture.



Figure 31: Examples of images posted by Communo-Capitalism and Komyoonizm Pages.

4.6 Religious Organizations

Facebook removed two Pages listed as religious organizations (Mesa Arizona Mission and Blake Rossell Mission). While the Mesa Arizona Mission has two likes and two followers, Blake Rossell Mission has no likes or followers. Both Pages were created on the same day (April 15, 202) but have no content uploaded.

5 Twitter Network Observations

While Twitter was not part of the dataset provided by Facebook, pivoting from Facebook and Instagram accounts readily revealed that the same network was operating on Twitter as well. Due to the timeline-based nature of Twitter, SIO was able to get a relatively good picture of the history of the network.

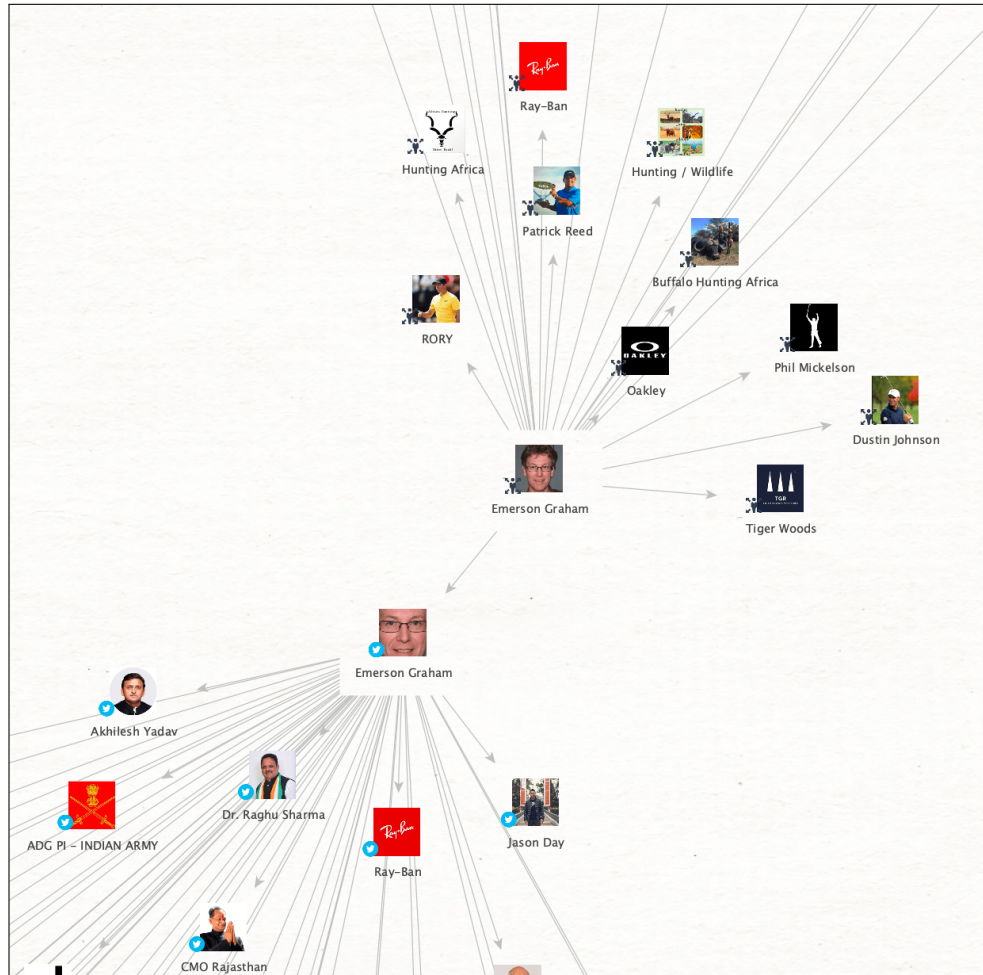
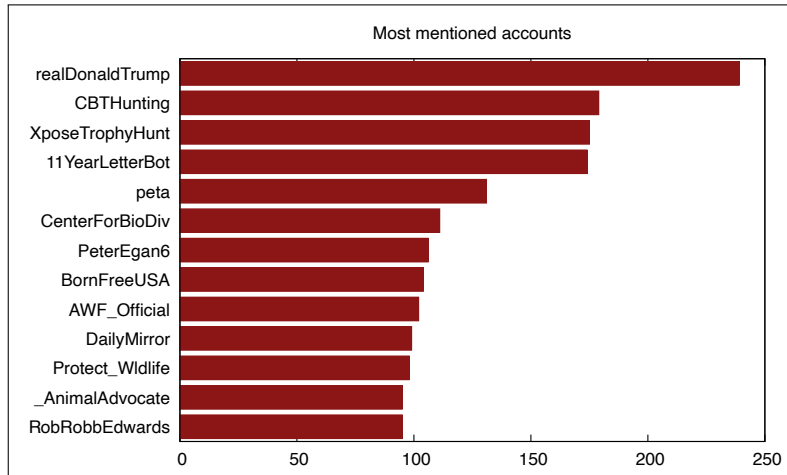


Figure 32: Pivoting from a Facebook-provided Instagram account. Graph made with Maltego.

Similarly to its presence on Instagram, the Twitter network followed political commentators and politicians, news outlets, and a wide range of environmental and animal rights groups.



Early accounts have a characteristic and repetitive bio line, in the format of “Doing x in location y!”, always emphasizing geography, along with profile photos of unrelated public figures.



Later in the network’s lifespan, accounts shifted to telegraphing their location with Twitter’s location attribute, with bland but less repetitive bio lines.

The first tweets in the network began on July 5, 2018. It started with right-wing retweets before adding left-wing tweets to the mix 10 days later. This activity continued until December of 2018, when all accounts simultaneously stopped tweeting. There was a conspicuous gap until July of 2019, when many of the accounts pivoted to discussing hunting. At this point, first-party

tweets became very rare, with interactions primarily involving replies to real accounts that posted pro or anti-hunting messages.

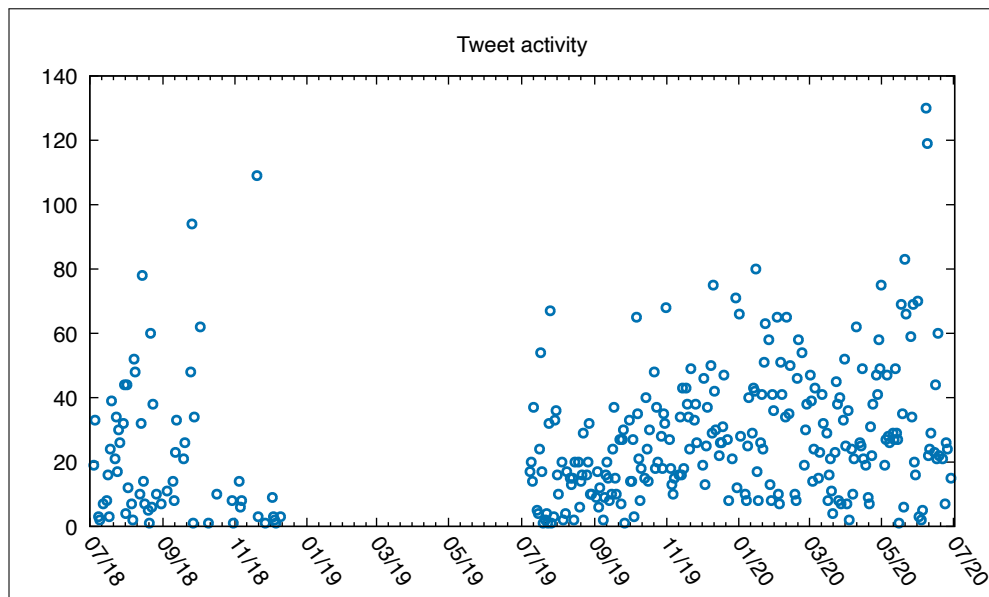


Figure 33: Tweeting activity of the network over time. Note the abrupt ceasing of activity on December 10, 2018, resuming on July 9, 2019.

Accounts that were previously vehemently anti-gun and had not mentioned hunting at all suddenly started espousing the virtues of hunting as a conservation method.

For example, @RaulJimenez2020, the most prolific user in the Twitter data set, presented as a left-wing, primarily Democratic Socialist persona, and frequently used hashtags like #DemocraticSocialism, #DSA, #UniversalBasicIncome, #FreeHealthCare and #AbolishTheSecond. Created in July of 2018, the account initially focused on pop culture and left-wing politics. In mid-2019, the account shifted to almost exclusively commenting on posts about trophy hunting, wolves, and African leaders and nations that do or do not allow hunting, and pushed for trophy hunting to be viewed as a beneficial practice.



Figure 34: @RaulJimenez2020, pre-message-shift.

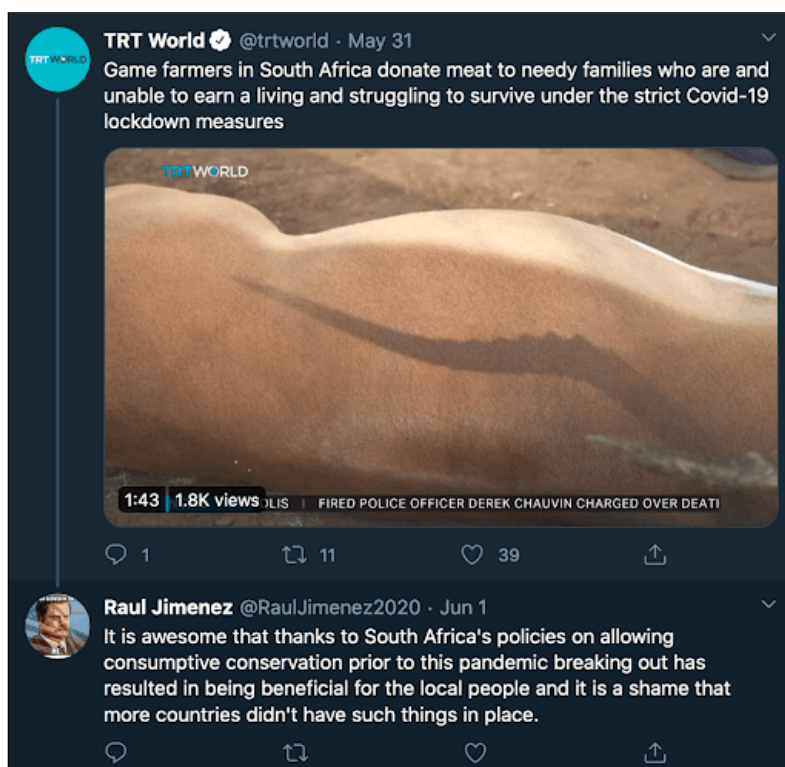


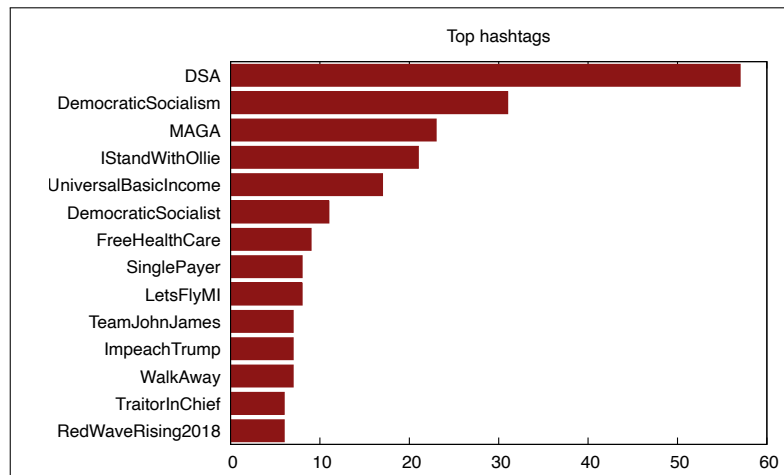
Figure 35: More recent hunting-focused tweets.

@tom_chandler_ created a week later in 2018 with the bio “My three C’s: Conservative, Christian, & @chilis”, was of the opposite bent. He posted right-wing content, frequently @ing and retweeting Charlie Kirk, Donald Trump, James Woods, and Michigan-related GOP entities. On July 9, 2019, he too shifted to be a pro-hunting account, having previously not mentioned the

topic at all.

Using both left and right-wing persona accounts was perhaps intended to make it seem that the hunting practices promoted by ICG had broad bipartisan appeal.

The most-used hashtags show a mix of right-wing and left-wing content, reflecting the earlier politically-focused activity in the network. After the 2019 pivot to hunting, hashtags were much less frequently used. The content began to focus on replies and plain prose instead of memes.



The most-mentioned accounts are much more evenly distributed along the lifetime of the network: we observe repeated mentions of politicians as well as environmental and wildlife organizations.

The last accounts in the discovered Twitter dataset were created on June 16, 2020, and had a brief burst of activity before all accounts fell silent on June 29.

6 Conclusion

When we evaluate online activity for evidence of inauthenticity, we consider a combination of signals: the provenance of the content; whether the voice it comes from is real or fabricated; the dissemination patterns and amplification tactics that the network leverages. The goal of this multifactor analysis is to ensure that the evaluation remains viewpoint agnostic. While there are bright lines when it comes to foreign influence operations, policies are fuzzier when considering U.S.-based actors, particularly as networked activism tactics are used by an increasing variety of domestic political and issue-based advocacy groups.

In this case, the vast majority of the content that Facebook attributed to the Rally Forge network consists of fairly standard political and issue-based advocacy work. However, we observe extensive inauthenticity in the form of fake accounts, and in the attempts to manipulate the public by way of astroturfed comment activity—what Oxford Internet Institute researchers have called “manufacturing consensus.” In the interest of ensuring that social networks fulfill their potential to be a place for authentic public debate, we

believe it is appropriate for social networks to enforce rules against secret coordination or unearned amplification, provided they do so transparently.

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 Observatory was created to learn about the abuse of the internet in real time, and to translate our research discoveries into training and policy innovations for the public good.