Graphika

Agitate the Debate

Inauthentic Accounts Pose as Taiwanese
Users to Spread Political Memes and
Videos Ahead of 2024 Election

By The Graphika Team

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Key Findings

- Graphika has identified a sustained and coordinated effort to manipulate online conversations about Taiwanese politics ahead of the country's presidential election in January 2024. The operation was active starting as early as May 2022, employing deceptive behaviors to disseminate Chinese-language videos and memes about Taiwanese political parties across Facebook, YouTube, and TikTok. We do not currently attribute this activity to a specific actor based on open-source indicators.

- The actors behind this activity leveraged a range of tactics, techniques, and procedures (TTPs) associated with online influence operations (IO). These TTPs included the use of likely inauthentic accounts that purported to be Taiwanese residents and displayed profile pictures of real people that were edited to alter their appearance. We also observed signs of coordination, such as different accounts in the operation posting identical content within minutes of each other.

- The operation appeared to focus on promoting Taiwan's Kuomintang (KMT) party while criticizing its opponents, including Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) candidate Lai Ching-te, Taiwan People's Party (TPP) candidate Ko Wen-je, and former independent candidate Terry Gou. The content closely tracked Taiwan's news cycle, quickly leveraging domestic news developments, such as controversies surrounding an egg shortage and the alleged drugging of toddlers at a kindergarten, to portray the KMT's opponents as incompetent and corrupt.

- Accounts in the operation consistently posted identical sets of hashtags to promote their content. Some posts have previously appeared as top search results on Facebook for #民進黨 [#DPP], #賴清德 [DPP candidate Lai Ching-te], and #侯友宜 [KMT candidate Hou Yu-ih], but we saw little evidence that the operation received engagement from authentic Facebook users.

- We assess that attempts by foreign and domestic IO actors to manipulate the online political conversation in Taiwan will very likely increase ahead of the 2024 election. We have previously seen IO actors linked to China repeatedly target Taiwanese audiences, and the DPP, TPP, and KMT have all been accused of attempting to covertly influence the online political debate.

Activity Overview

Graphika has identified a sustained and coordinated effort to manipulate online conversations about Taiwanese politics ahead of the country's presidential election in January next year. The operation was active as early as May 2022, employing deceptive behaviors to disseminate Chinese-language videos and memes about Taiwanese political parties across Facebook, YouTube, and TikTok. As of Dec. 4, 2023, Graphika identified over 800 Facebook profiles, 13 Facebook pages, one TikTok account, and one YouTube channel in the activity set. We do not currently attribute this activity, most of which has since been removed by the relevant social media platforms, to a specific actor based on open-source indicators.

The operation centered on a cross-platform persona that used the name "Agitate Taiwan" [鼓動台灣] on TikTok and a now-suspended YouTube channel. This persona posted multiple videos a day to both platforms, promoting narratives that were consistently supportive of Taiwan's Kuomintang (KMT) party and critical of the pro-independence Democratic Progressive Party (DPP). Clusters of accounts that showed signs of inauthenticity and coordination then shared the videos on Facebook, posting in groups about Taiwanese news and politics. The Facebook accounts also posted political memes and used the same recurring set of Chinese-language hashtags to promote their content.

The operation appeared to focus on promoting the KMT, a party traditionally viewed in Taiwan as supportive of China, while criticizing the KMT's opponents in the presidential election, including DPP candidate Lai Ching-te, Taiwan People's Party (TPP) candidate Ko Wen-je, and former independent candidate Terry Gou. The narratives closely tracked Taiwan's news cycle, quickly leveraging domestic news developments such as controversies surrounding Taiwan's egg shortage and the alleged drugging of toddlers at a kindergarten to portray the KMT's political opponents as incompetent and corrupt.

Our assessments allowed for the likelihood that authentic users also organically discovered and independently shared the same content on social media. We have not included those accounts in the scope of this analysis and assess that the signs of inauthentic behavior, coordination, and other TTPs provide high confidence that the activity discussed in this report represents a coordinated effort to manipulate the online political conversation in Taiwan ahead of the election.

Screenshots of a video titled "DPP encourages affiliates to commit fraud. Prosecutors and investigators turn a blind eye" [民進黨助長詐騙, 檢調不查, 包庇自己人], which the Agitate Taiwan persona posted to YouTube on Oct. 13, 2023, (top). Multiple likely inauthentic accounts subsequently shared the video in Taiwanese Facebook groups using the same set of hashtags (bottom).

Tactics, Techniques, & Procedures

Agitate Taiwan

The operation centered on a cross-platform persona on TikTok and YouTube with the name "Agitate Taiwan" [鼓動台灣]. The persona was active on TikTok since December 2022 and on YouTube since August 2022, where it used the same stock photo profile picture and Chinese-language account description: "Supervision of the government is the right of the people." The persona operated under the handle @agitate_tw on both platforms but appears to have previously used @rased_tw on TikTok.

Agitate Taiwan effectively acted as a content hub for the operation, posting multiple videos a day to TikTok and YouTube. A set of likely inauthentic accounts then distributed the videos on Facebook, as discussed below. Based on open-source indicators, we were not able to assess whether Agitate Taiwan is an inauthentic persona operated by the same actors as the wider network or an authentic user whose content was repurposed by the operation.
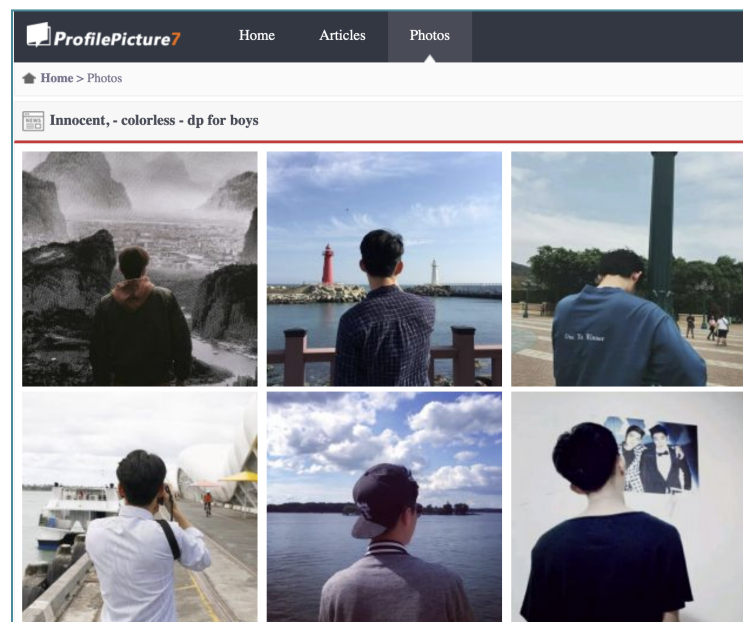

Agitate Taiwan's profile picture (top) appears to be a stock photo available on online profile picture databases (bottom).

Facebook Fakery

We identified a set of over 800 Facebook profiles that we assess acted as the operation's primary amplification arm. These profiles operated in clusters of around a dozen assets, which repeatedly posted videos that the Agitate Taiwan persona first shared to YouTube or TikTok in Facebook groups about Taiwanese news and politics. Each cluster focused on a different set of videos and also posted memes about Taiwanese political candidates.

The accounts purported to be residents of Taiwan, listing Taiwanese education or employment details in their bios, and showed signs of inauthenticity, such as using profile pictures of real people repurposed from elsewhere on the internet. The profiles also displayed indications of coordination. For example, accounts in a given cluster would typically upload their profile picture and cover image on the same day or publish identical content within minutes of each other.
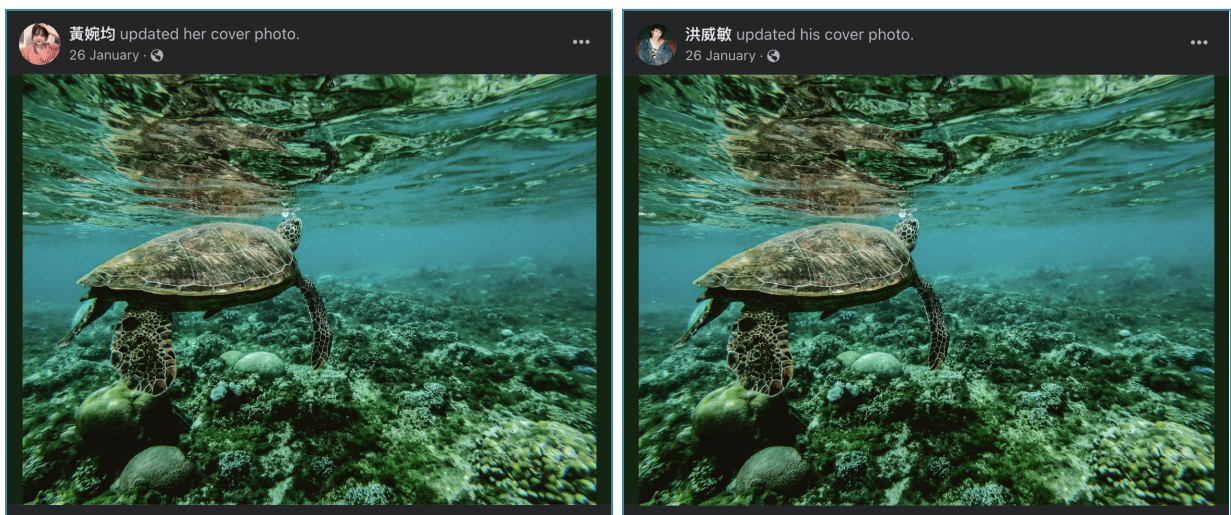
Two likely inauthentic Facebook accounts in the operation that uploaded their profile pictures and the same cover image within minutes of each other on the same day.

Additionally, we observed these Facebook profiles repeatedly sharing TikTok videos with the same "web ID." Web IDs for TikTok videos are shown in the URL generated when a user clicks "copy link." Based on Graphika testing, these web IDs appear to be unique for each user visiting the platform from the same device during a given browser session, meaning all video-sharing links copied by that user will have the same ID. This suggests that Facebook accounts in the operation regularly shared TikTok videos via links created by the same user(s).
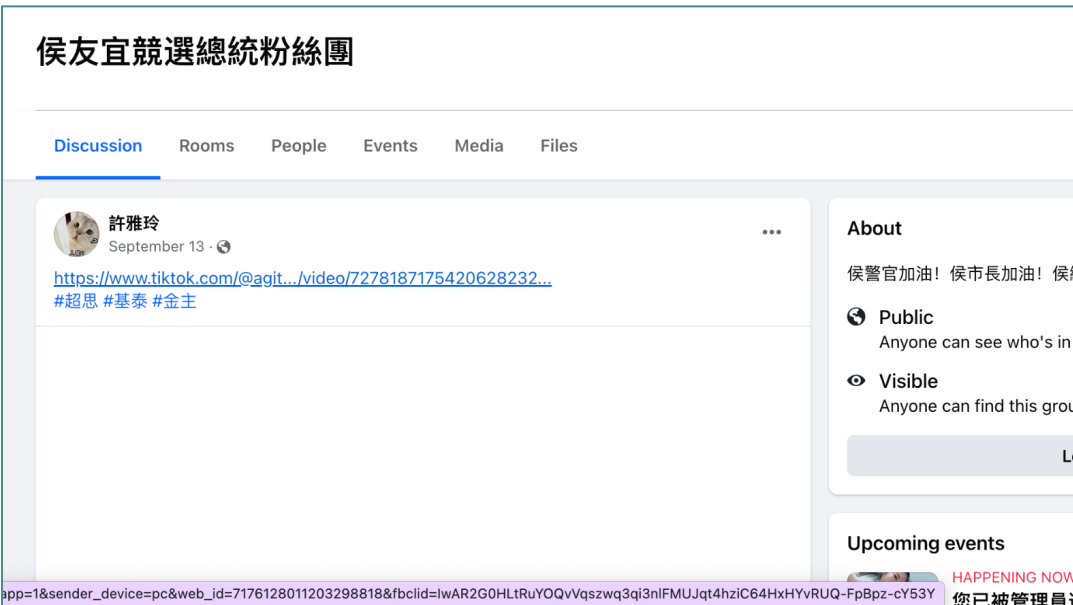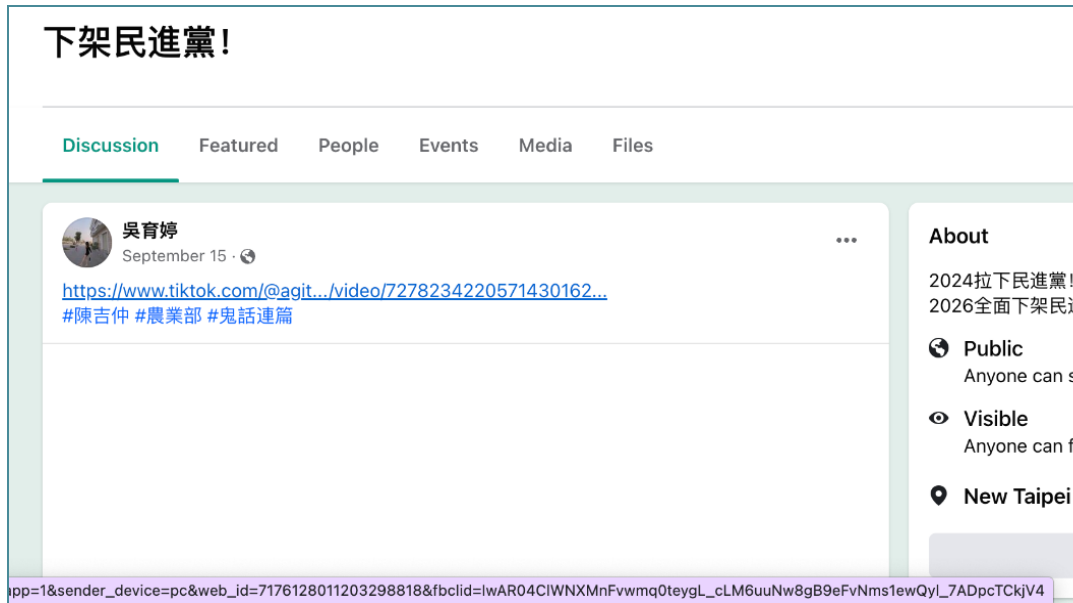
Two Facebook accounts in the operation sharing anti-DPP videos from the TikTok account "agitate_tw" to Facebook. Both TikTok URLs include the same web ID: 7176128011203298818.

No Page Unturned

While the Facebook profiles showed few connections to operation assets outside of their own network clusters, the accounts consistently liked and followed an overlapping set of Facebook pages. These mostly consisted of pages for Taiwanese businesses and politicians, but also a subset of pages that we assess are very likely part of the same operation.

This subset comprised 13 Facebook pages that were all created between Oct. 25 - 26, 2022, often claimed to be supermarkets or convenience stores in Taiwan, and used names critical of Taiwan's

pro-independence [pan-Green](#) coalition. Some of the pages incorporated Chinese transliterations of Taiwanese-language slang into their names. However, we identified multiple incorrect or uncommonly used transliterations, calling into question the operators' Taiwanese language fluency. For example, a page with the name "The People's Only Diary" [人民幹焦日記] used the term "幹焦," resembling an incorrect transliteration of "only" in Taiwanese, rather than the common transliteration "幹譙" [verbally abuse]. The page operators likely intended to use the name "The People's Verbal Abuse Diary" or "The People's Insult Diary."

The pages showed little public-facing activity. None of them had posted more than four times as of Nov. 28, 2023, and most administered Facebook groups of which they were the only member. These groups were created between July 25 - 26, 2023, and had names critical of the pan-Green coalition and supportive of the KMT-aligned [pan-Blue](#) coalition.
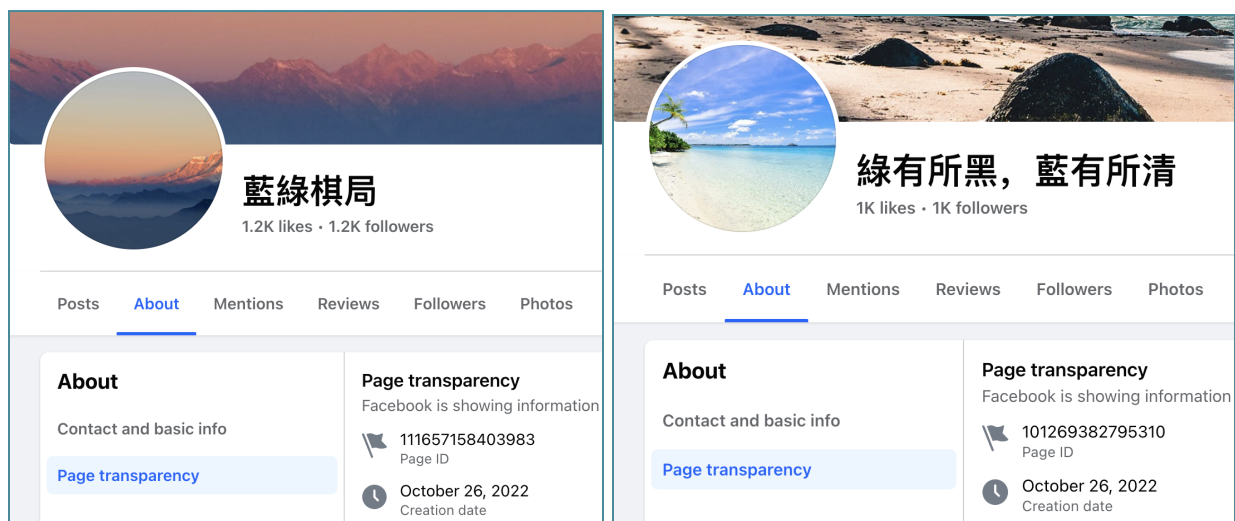
Two of the identified Facebook pages that were created on Oct. 26, 2022, and used names critical of the pan-Green coalition and/or supportive of the pan-Blue coalition.

Groups administered by one of the identified Facebook pages. These groups all contained one member and used names referring to Taiwanese political parties, figures, or coalitions, such as "Green is the Color of Trash" [綠色的色是垃圾的色].

Checking In

Accounts in the operation attempted to bolster their inauthentic personas as local Taiwanese citizens by using traditional Chinese names, listing Taiwanese education and employer information, and even claiming to be in Taiwan through Facebook's "check-in" feature. Interestingly, in our investigation, this last behavior served as a useful indicator to identify assets in the network as multiple inauthentic accounts typically "checked in" to the same locations.

Facebook accounts in the operation "checking in" to the same cafe in Taiwan on the same day.

Swapping Smiles

A small number of Facebook accounts in the operation used profile pictures of real people that had been edited, likely in an attempt to obscure the image's original source. In the example below, the image on the left shows a profile picture used by a Facebook account in the operation that has been edited to change the individual's face. The image on the right shows the original picture, which was first posted by an apparently authentic Facebook page in 2018.

A profile picture used by a Facebook account in the operation (left) and the original image (right) posted by an apparently authentic Facebook page in 2018. Redactions added by Graphika.

Narratives & Content

#Trend

Assets in the operation all used the same set of Chinese-language hashtags in their posts, often deployed in identical hashtag blocks to promote the same video. These hashtags reflected the operation's focus on Taiwanese politics and included #民進黨 [DPP], #農業部 [Ministry of Agriculture], #賴清德 [DPP candidate Lai Ching-te], #陳吉仲 [DPP Minister of Agriculture Chen Chi-chung], and #侯友宜 [KMT candidate Hou Yu-ih]. Some of these posts have previously appeared as top search results on Facebook for #民進黨 [#DPP], #賴清德 [DPP candidate Lai Ching-te], and #侯友宜 [KMT candidate Hou Yu-ih], but we saw little evidence that the operation received engagement from authentic Facebook users.


Different accounts in the operation shared the same meme to different Facebook groups using identical hashtag blocks within a 5-minute window.

One Template, Many Videos

Videos promoted by the operation consistently used the same format, featuring a visually distinctive title card with text in Chinese and then repurposed local news or political talk show footage. For example, a video Agitate Taiwan posted on TikTok in October opened with the title card "The DPP supports the abolition of the death penalty, completely disregarding victims' families" [民進黨支持廢死 完全忽視受害者家屬], followed by news coverage about the death penalty from pro-China outlet CTi News. The video ended with a title card reading: "How are

victims' families meant to endure the abolishment of the death penalty? It's essentially causing secondary damage to victims' families" [廢死 要受害家屬情何以堪 根本對受害家屬二次傷害].
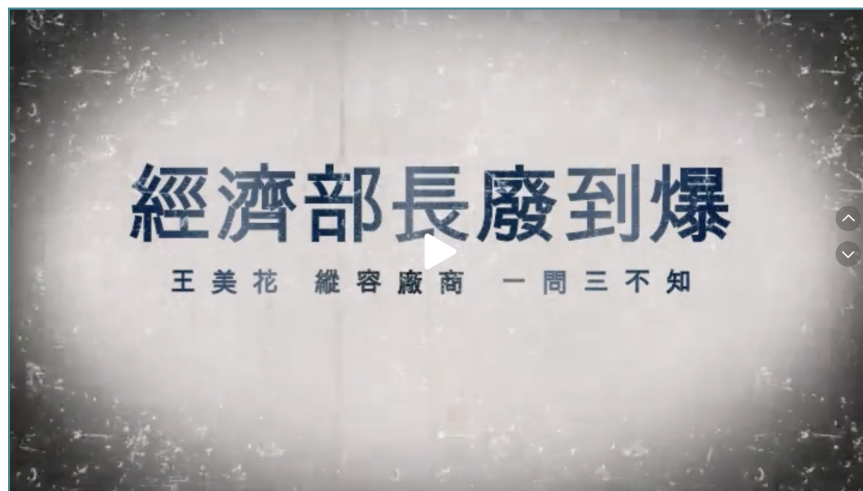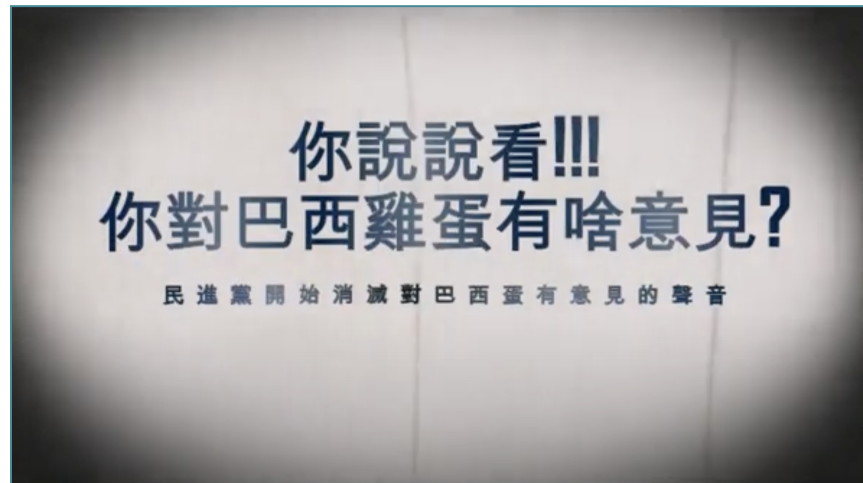
Videos posted by the Agitate Taiwan persona and then reshared by likely inauthentic accounts on Facebook all used the same template to promote anti-Democratic Progressive Party narratives about issues including Taiwan's egg shortage (top) and Taiwan's Ministry of Economic Affairs (middle), and a Taiwanese pharmaceutical company (bottom).

Narratives

The operation's content closely tracked the Taiwanese news cycle, with accounts posting videos and memes about domestic political incidents soon after they occurred. This content broadly fell into three main categories:

- Criticizing the DPP and its candidate, Lai Ching-te. In particular, these videos claimed that the DPP is corrupt and highlighted controversial issues such as debates over the use of the death penalty and Taiwan's egg shortage.

- Highlighting personal and political controversies associated with TPP candidate Ko Wen-je and former independent candidate Terry Gou. These included Ko's alleged racist remarks and claims that Gou's candidacy petition team traded voters' personally identifiable information. After the announcement of a potential KMT-TPP coalition ticket, the operation criticized Ko as being "dark green" or having "white skin with green bones" - implying he is secretly aligned with the pro-independence DPP.

- Supporting KMT candidate Hou Yu-ih. These posts accounted for the smallest proportion of the operation's content and highlighted Hou's political activities, policy proposals, and past achievements.

The operation's video and image content consistently highlighted alleged DPP failings (left) and the personal flaws of Taiwan People's Party candidate Ko Wen-je and former independent candidate Terry Gou (right).

Estimative Language Legend

Assessments of Likelihood

Graphika uses the following vocabulary to indicate the likelihood of a hypothesis proving correct. If we are unable to assess likelihood due to limited or non-existent information, we may use terms such as "suggest."

Almost No Chance	Very Unlikely	Unlikely	Real Chance	Likely	Very Likely	Almost Certain(ly)
1-5%	5-20%	20-45%	45-55%	55-80%	80-95%	95-99%

Confidence Levels: Indicators of Sourcing and Corroboration

Graphika uses confidence levels to indicate the quality of information, sources, and corroboration underpinning our assessments.

Low Confidence	Medium Confidence	High Confidence
Assessment based on information from a non-trusted source and/or information we have not been able to independently corroborate.	Assessment based on information that we are unable to sufficiently corroborate and/or information open to multiple interpretations.	Assessment based on information from multiple trusted sources that we are able to fully corroborate.

Graphika

About Us

Graphika *is an intelligence company that maps the world's online communities and conversations. We help partners worldwide, including Fortune 500 companies, Silicon Valley, human rights organizations, and universities, discover how communities form online and understand the flow of information and influence within large-scale social networks. Customers rely on Graphika for a unique, network-first approach to the global online landscape.*

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