



Graphika

Coordinated Inauthentic Bee-havior

The Thin Line Between Marketing and Political Propaganda: How an Egyptian Firm Ran Fake News Pages Targeting Ethiopia, Sudan and Turkey

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Takedowns

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Executive Summary

On April 6, Facebook [announced](#) the removal in March of a network of accounts and pages that it said originated in Egypt and violated its policy against foreign interference. The set consisted of six pages, 17 Facebook accounts, and three Instagram accounts, which posted about news and political events in Amharic, Arabic, and Turkish to target audiences in Ethiopia, Sudan, and Turkey. “The people behind this network relied on a combination of authentic, duplicate, and fake accounts, some of which used stock photos and went through significant name changes. These accounts were used to create and manage Pages posing as entities located in the countries they targeted,” Facebook said.

Facebook said the network was particularly active in mid-2020 and posted content supporting the Egyptian government, as well as criticism of Turkish foreign policy and Ethiopia’s construction of a dam on the Blue Nile. “Although the people behind it attempted to conceal their identities and coordination, our investigation found links to Bee Interactive, a marketing firm in Egypt,” the company said.

Facebook shared the set of accounts and pages with Graphika for further analysis before removing them from its platforms. This report details our analysis and assessments in two parts: the first examines the Facebook takedown set and its online footprint, the second looks at additional marketing campaigns we found with connections to staff at Bee Interactive.

This operation illustrates the role commercial marketing firms play in political influence campaigns, highlighting the porous border between their legitimate work and covert, inauthentic activity. While investigators have previously exposed parts of this burgeoning influence-for-hire industry - notably in [Egypt](#), [Israel](#), the [United States](#) and [Canada](#) - the activity identified here

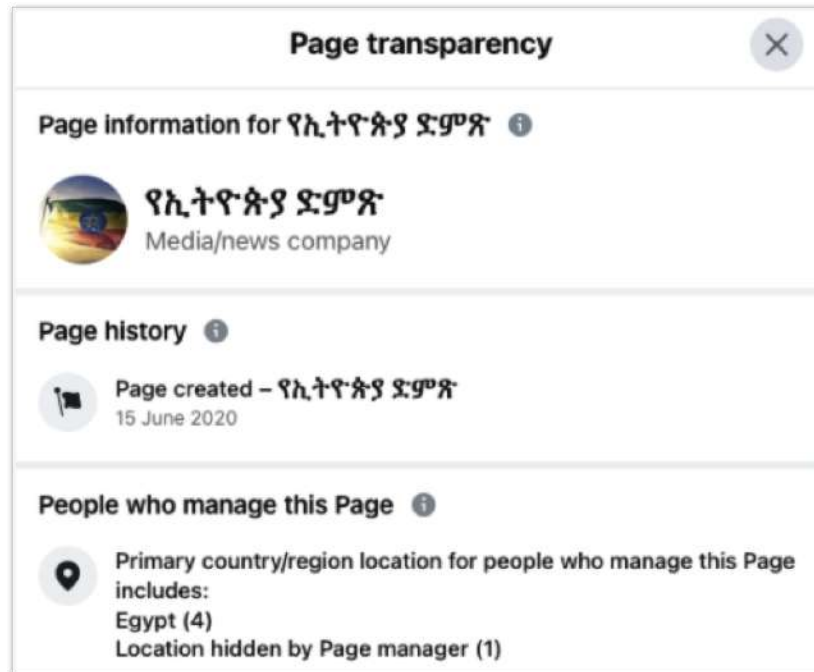
provides a rare in-depth look at how these operations can align and overlap with a company's routine marketing work.

Below are our key findings:

- Five of the six pages identified by Facebook presented themselves as independent media outlets in order to target audiences in Ethiopia and Sudan. These pages republished extracts from local-language news articles and the topics they chose to cover often aligned with Egypt's geopolitical interests. These included support for bilateral relations between Cairo and Khartoum, and criticism of the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam
- A sixth page targeted audiences in Turkey with content claiming to form a record of human rights abuses in the country. The page and an accompanying website were overtly anti-government in their messaging
- The accounts identified by Facebook included authentic personas with multiple public links to staff at a social media marketing firm in Egypt called Bee Interactive Ltd.
- Some of the activity in the set connects to other marketing and promotion campaigns conducted by Bee Interactive employees. This included running Facebook groups supporting members of the Egyptian government, promoting beauty brands, and building audiences for genuine media outlets
- Overall, the "influence operation" aspects of the set were not particularly sophisticated. Many of the inauthentic accounts were easily identified as such, the authentic personas made little or no effort to hide their connections to Bee Interactive, and the pages mostly engaged in copy-pasting extracts of external news articles, which failed to gain significant traction with their target audiences

Part 1: The Takedown Set

As a set, the six pages identified by Facebook showed clear signs of being inauthentic and centrally coordinated. For example, four of the pages were all created on the same day - June 15, 2020 - and three of them listed multiple admins in Egypt despite purporting to operate from Ethiopia and Sudan.



Page transparency information for "The Voice of Ethiopia"

The pages posted in Arabic, Amharic, Turkish, and occasionally English. Most of the activity dated from mid to late 2020 and only three of the pages were still active as of March 25. The two Ethiopia-focused pages were the only assets to gain any notable traction, with a combined following of 388,000. The three pages aimed at audiences in Sudan had just over 40,000 followers between them and the Turkey-related page had 316. Similarly, none of the pages achieved any significant engagement with their target audiences and most posts received only a handful of shares or likes.

All of the pages promoted narratives aligned with Egypt's geopolitical interests in the Middle East and North Africa. Often, this showed in the topics the actors chose to cover.

Copypasta News Feeds

The two Ethiopia pages and three Sudan pages operated using the same model. All five presented themselves as independent media outlets but almost exclusively posted snippets of text lifted from local-language news articles. The written content was usually posted as a caption on an accompanying image lifted from the original source.

Most of the content related to current affairs in Ethiopia and Sudan and was presented with a political slant. The page Sudan Today, for example, had a profile picture of former Sudanese President Omar al-Bashir and in the final weeks of his presidency posted extracts of articles promoting his work as the country's leader. The page last posted in March 2019, shortly before al-Bashir was deposed after months of popular protests.¹

The two other Sudan-focused pages paid particular attention to the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam, which Ethiopia is building on the Blue Nile river but Egypt and Sudan both view as a threat to their fresh water supplies.² The pages regularly posted content supporting diplomatic ties between Khartoum and Cairo, notably on joint infrastructure projects. They also promoted Egypt's reported diplomatic efforts to solve the crisis, and criticism of Ethiopian Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed's commitment to the dam's construction.

¹ <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-47892742>

² <https://www.chathamhouse.org/2020/08/nile-basin-states-must-persist-water-diplomacy>



A post by the page The Pulse of Sudan promoting Egypt-Sudan bilateral relations

In Ethiopia, the two pages promoted both anti- and pro-government messaging. The Voice of Ethiopia page was broadly supportive of the government's actions in Ethiopia's northern Tigray region, critical of the opposition Tigray People's Liberation Front, and quick to detail the work and actions of Ahmed as prime minister. The Free Ethiopia page, on the other hand, was sharply critical of Ahmed's decisions, championed the cause of dissident journalist Eskinder Nega³, and railed against "political elites" in a rare English-language post. That an Egyptian marketing firm operated pseudo-media outlets to influence public conversation around the conflict in Tigray was particularly noteworthy and adds to a growing body of evidence documenting the use of fake accounts and influence campaigns in the region⁴.

³ www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2019/06/ethiopia-stop-harassing-eskinder-nega-for-his-opinions

⁴ See for instance:

<https://www.theglobeandmail.com/world/article-tigray-conflict-sparks-a-war-of-fake-tweets-and-false-prop-aganda/>



A rare English-language post by the "Free Ethiopia" page

Killed in Turkey

The page "Killed in turkey" operated with a different model and clear political agenda. The page purported to be a record of human rights abuses committed in Turkey, and directed users to an English-language website with details of specific cases. Its profile and cover photos showed blood-stained depictions of Turkish President Tayyip Erdogan.



Cover and profile pictures used by the page "Killed in turkey"

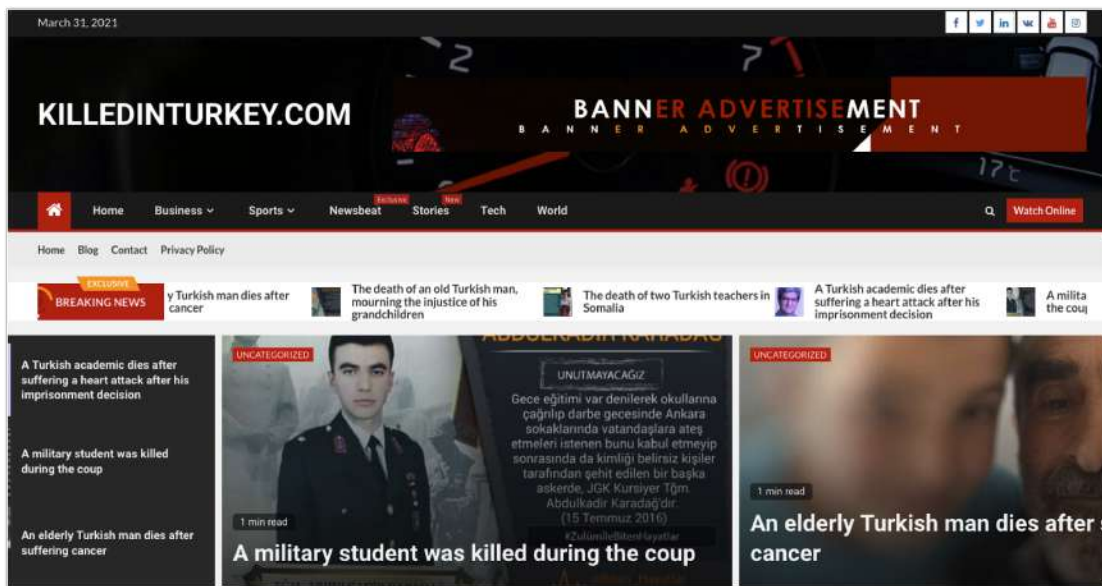
Each post by "Killed in turkey" followed the same format - a photo of an alleged victim of human rights abuses with a short description in Arabic, English and Turkish. Much of the content was

copied from a victims' remembrance organization called [Biten Hayatlar](#) and multiple posts prominently displayed the group's name and logo.



A "Killed in turkey" post with the Biten Hayatlar name and logo

Despite making little effort to promote it on social media, "Killed in turkey" linked in its description to the website [killedinturkey\[.\]com](#), which hosted identical content to the Facebook page. The site gave no information about its operators and was a crudely-constructed Wordpress template with multiple sections left unfinished. The social media links, for example, still directed to the default accounts owned by the Wordpress template designer.



The unfinished homepage for killedinturkey[.]com

Website registration records for killedinturkey[.]com gave no information about the site's owners, but Graphika was able to identify a second website which we can connect to the same actors with a medium degree of confidence.

All of the posts on killedinturkey[.]com were written by an author with the username "GNMP6gH5t6YEIK." A Google search for that username returned five results - four websites hosting an excerpt of a book about the teachings of dissident Turkish cleric Fethullah Gulen with the username incongruously pasted in the middle of the text, and a website called turkeyleaks[.]com.

Turkey Leaks posted excerpts of Turkish-language news articles about current affairs and, despite its name, didn't appear to host any leaked content. Like killedinturkey[.]com, all of its posts are authored by user GNMP6gH5t6YEIK and the site is a barebones Wordpress template. On at least two occasions, both killedinturkey[.]com and turkeyleaks[.]com have posted the same content - most recently a story about the reported death of a Turkish academic.

Both sites used Domains by Proxy for anonymous registration and do not make use of any analytics. Neither site received much promotion on social media, with turkeyleaks[.]com achieving a peak of 29 total engagements on Facebook in December 2019 according to CrowdTangle.

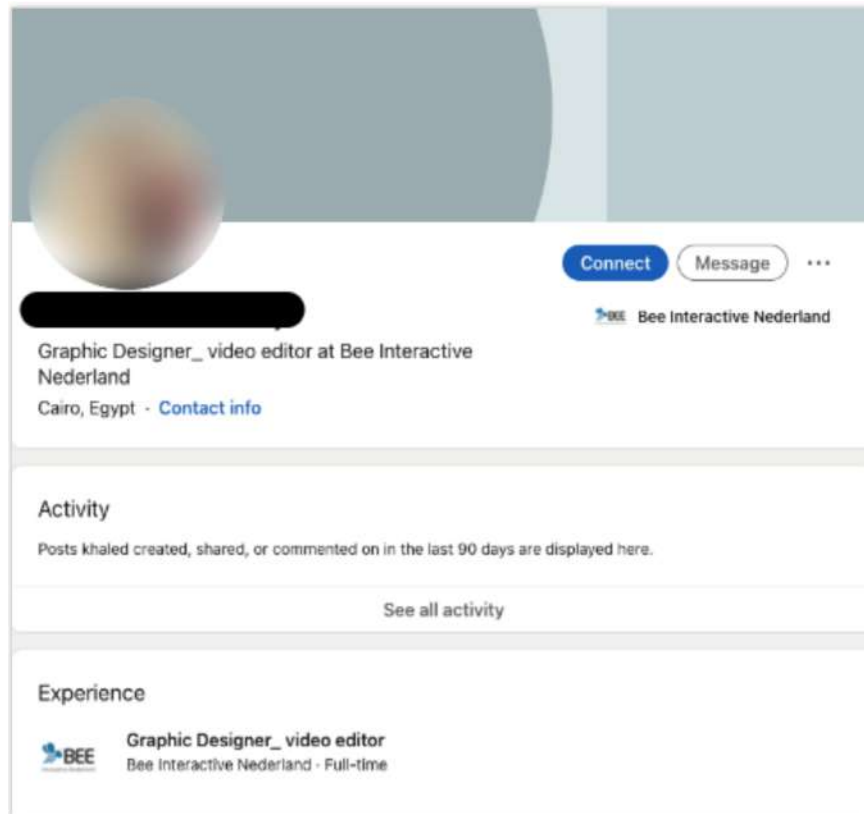


Killedinturkey[.]com (left) and turkeyleaks[.]com (right) posting the same story about the reported death of a Turkish academic

Real People, Real Lives

Graphika assessed that five of the public Facebook and Instagram profiles included in the set were authentic and the personal accounts of individuals living in Egypt. These accounts shared a large amount of content detailing their real lives, such as wedding photos, comments in local-residents' groups, and interactions with friends. They were also frequently listed as admins for Facebook groups and pages not included in the set.

The most interesting thing about these accounts was their repeated, overt connections to Bee Interactive Ltd, the social media marketing firm named by Facebook in its takedown announcement. Indeed, none of the authentic accounts made any attempt to hide their affiliation. Three openly listed Bee Interactive as their place of work and in other cases, LinkedIn profiles using the same name and photo also identified the company as an employer. Graphika believes these accounts likely belonged to Bee Interactive employees who operated the six inauthentic pages identified by Facebook.



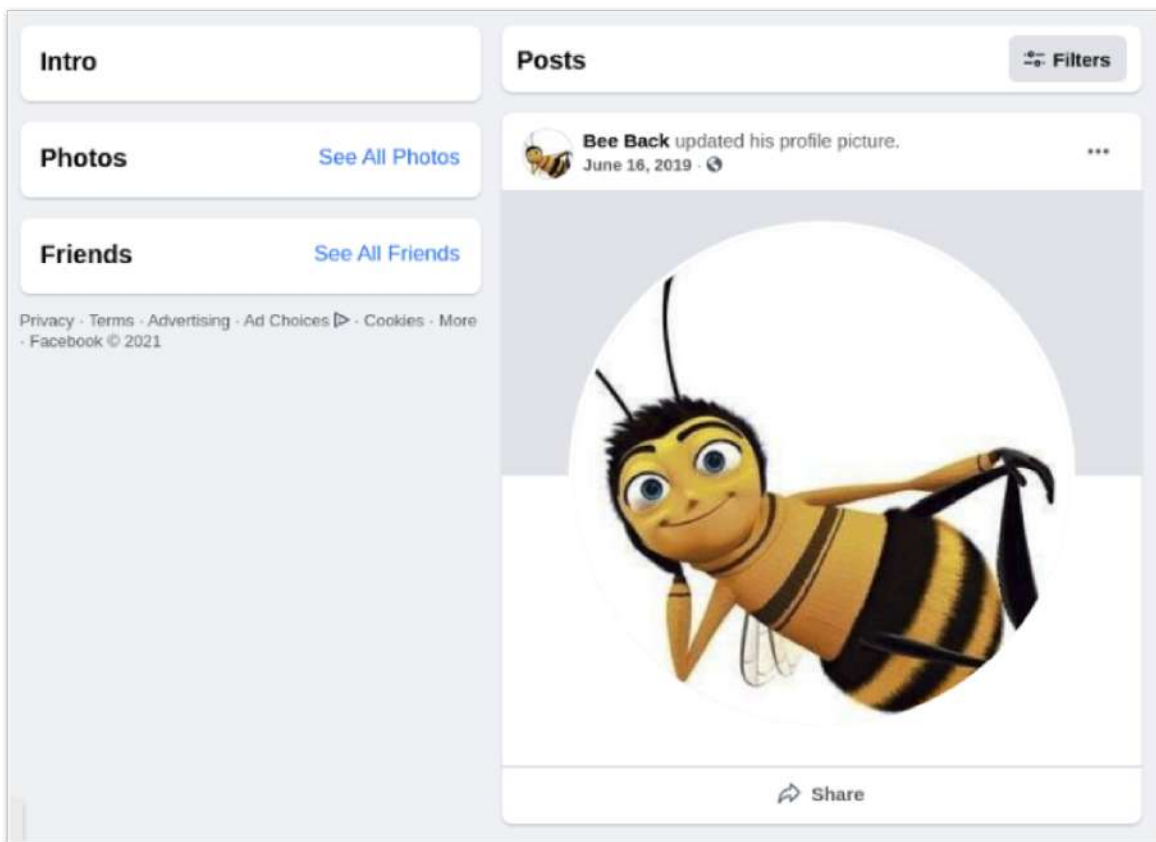
A LinkedIn profile confirming one account owner's work at a Dutch subsidiary of Bee Interactive

Un-bee-lievable Personas

In addition to the authentic accounts, a number of profiles included in the set were poorly developed personas who did not play a major role in content amplification. These profiles tended to have fewer page likes and group memberships, and less content posted overall.

What little content these profiles did share primarily came from outlets connected to Bee Interactive employees. This content was generally non-political and commercially focused - at least one account posted multiple times about new Chinese-made smartphones, for example. Of note, one of the poorly-developed profiles - which showed some signs of inauthenticity, such as using a stolen photo of an Egyptian soldier - had “liked” the “Free Ethiopia” page included in the set.

And in an apparent nod to Bee Interactive’s mascot and logo, two of the accounts adopted the personas of cartoon bees. Both “Bee Back” and “John Smith” used the same profile picture of an animated character from the Bee Movie. Bee Back’s only visible activity was posting their profile picture on June 16, 2019. John Smith had 100 friends and posts dating back to 2012 but hadn’t posted since November 2015.



A profiles for “Bee Back” using an animated bee image as their profile picture

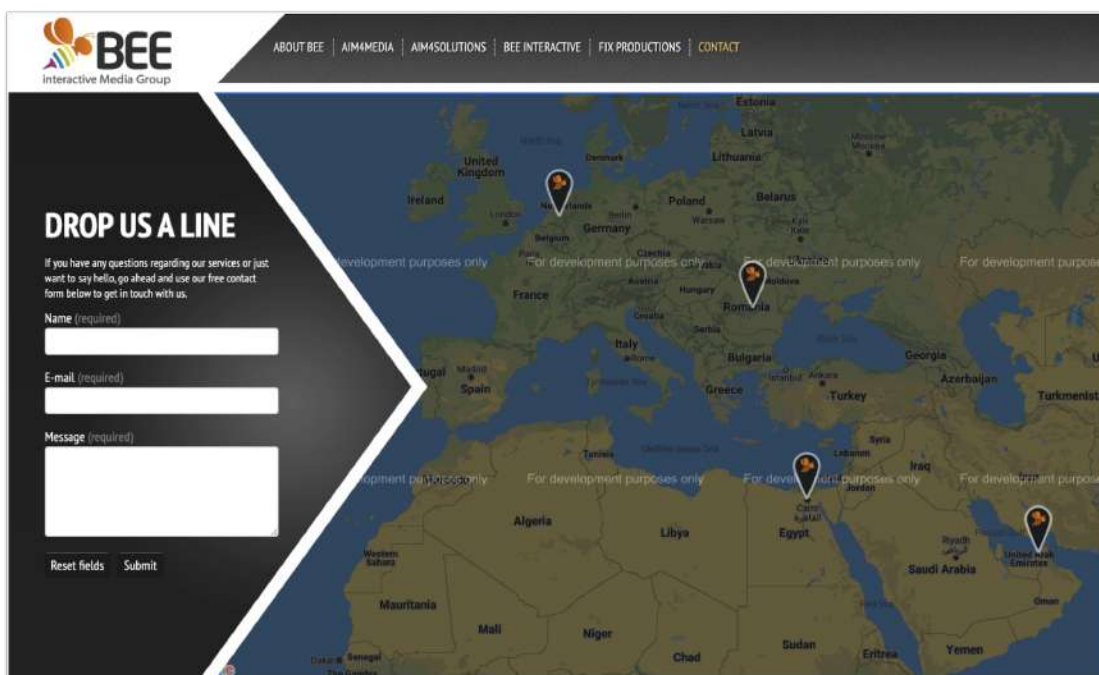
Part 2: Bee Interactive

A Legitimate Bee-sness

As detailed above, Graphika found multiple open-source indicators corroborating Facebook's attribution to a marketing and advertising firm called Bee Interactive Ltd.

Bee Interactive is part of a group of IT and online marketing companies operating as Bee Interactive Media Group. On its website, the group lists four companies which provide a range of IT, content production, and digital advertising services. It describes itself as “a group of independent Internet companies that offer services across the entire Internet value chain, from consultancy to the execution of your online marketing strategy.”

According to its website, the company has offices in Egypt, the Netherlands, Romania, and the United Arab Emirates. The offices in Egypt and the UAE are listed alongside an email contact for Bee Interactive with addresses in Cairo and Dubai.



Office locations listed on the website for Bee Interactive Media Group

A LinkedIn page for Bee Interactive Media Group gives an address in the Dutch town of Tiel but says the majority of its 43 public employees are located in Egypt. The company also operates a LinkedIn page for Bee Interactive Nederland, which was listed as an employer by some of the Egypt-based individuals identified in the set.

BEE
interactive
Media Group

Bee Media Group.
Marketing & Advertising · Tiel, 4001 KZ · 1,799 followers
See all 43 employees on LinkedIn

+ Follow Visit website More

Home About Posts Jobs **People** Insights

43 employees

Search employees by title, keyword or school

< Previous Next >

Where they live	+ Add	Where they studied	+ Add
35 Egypt		5 Cairo University	
2 Netherlands		4 Ain Shams University	

LinkedIn page for Bee Interactive Media Group

BEE
Interactive Nederland

Bee Interactive Nederland
Met ruim 15 jaar ervaring ondersteunen wij iedere dag onze partners in alle fases van online marketing.
Marketing & Advertising · Zaltbommel, Gelderland · 119 followers
See all 12 employees on LinkedIn

+ Follow Visit website More

Home About Posts Jobs **People** Insights

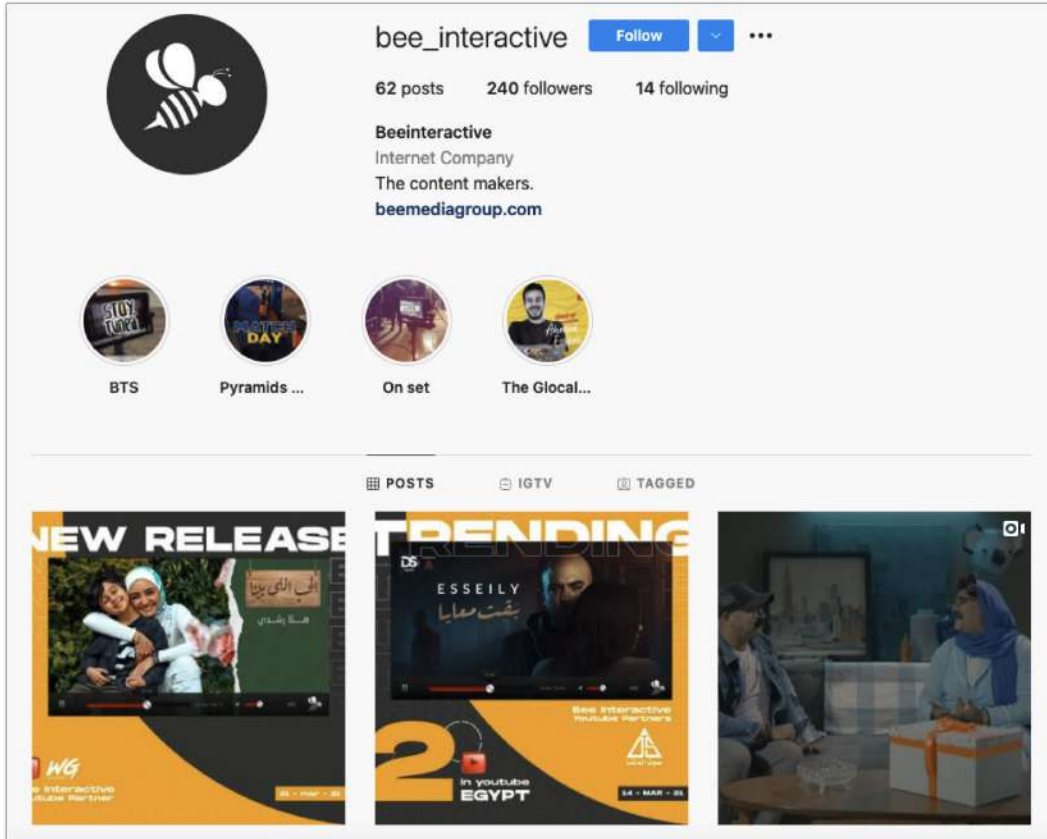
LinkedIn page for Bee Interactive Nederland

The website for Bee Interactive Ltd is offline and redirects to a placeholder image with the caption "COMING SOON..." The company does, however, maintain active accounts on Facebook and Instagram which were not included in the takedown set curated by Facebook.

The Facebook page has 7,888 followers and regularly posts about Bee Interactive's latest work, which appear to be regular social media marketing projects for legitimate commercial clients. These have recently included collaborations with Egyptian actors and YouTube personalities, promotional shoots for local car manufacturers, and adverts for food and drink companies.



Bee Interactive's Facebook page, which was not included in the takedown set



Bee Interactive's Instagram account, which was not included in the takedown set

Bee-spoke Content

In addition to the work promoted on Bee Interactive's Facebook page, Graphika found 18 groups which listed company employees as admins. These groups were separate from the takedown set identified by Facebook but provide an insight into the employees' further activity on the platform.

Some of these groups were political in nature, including efforts to rally support for members of the Egyptian government, while others were clearly commercial or only engaged in posting clickbait in order to build a large online audience. For example, one of the groups called "The Korean Girl" in Arabic had 28,954 followers but exclusively shared videos of Asian people eating. It was not clear whether this activity was part of the employees' work for Bee Interactive or unrelated to their jobs.



"The Korean Girl" Facebook group run by a Profile identified in the set

Two of the groups identified by Graphika as being run by Bee Interactive employees focused on promoting Egyptian government messaging around the Covid-19 pandemic. One used the name of Egyptian Health Minister Hala Zayed and had 77,800 members; the other was called "الكورونا في مصر Coronavirus disease (COVID-19)," had just over 10,000 members, and was co-run by the community page @coronavirusegypt2020. Both groups regularly posted updates about the coronavirus situation in Egypt, paying particular attention to public safety measures taken by the government.



Header for the group “الكورونا في مصر Coronavirus disease (COVID-19)” which was run by three Bee Interactive employees and the community Page @coronavirusegypt2020

In a similar vein, the most popular group was called محبي الدكتور مصطفى مدبولي رئيس مجلس الوزراء (“Lovers of Prime Minister Dr. Mostafa Madbouly”). The group had 182,189 members as of April 1 and says it is dedicated to supporting the incumbent Egyptian prime minister: “In appreciation of the great role that the Prime Minister Dr. Mostafa Madbouly is playing, we decided to make this group in order to send a greeting of pride and appreciation to him.”

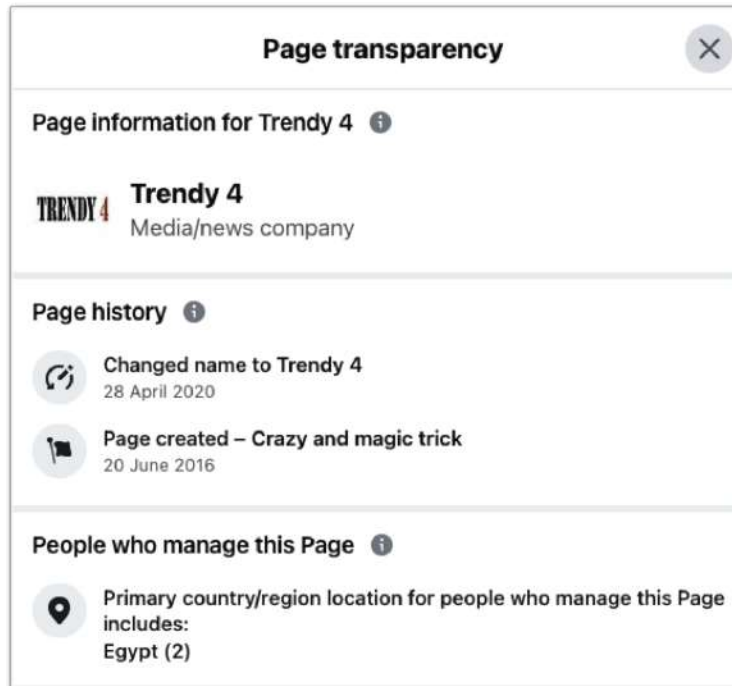
The group’s admins were listed as two Bee Interactive employees, a third profile from the Facebook takedown set and an online media outlet called Trendy4. Graphika repeatedly encountered references to Trendy4 while investigating Bee Interactive. Notably, one account named it as an employer alongside Bee Interactive and multiple other profiles routinely “liked” and promoted its content.

Interestingly, in January this year, the “Lovers of Prime Minister Dr. Mostafa Madbouly” group briefly changed its name to “Trendy4.” This was possibly an attempt to grow an audience around a populist issue and then port it over to support a client or affiliated project.



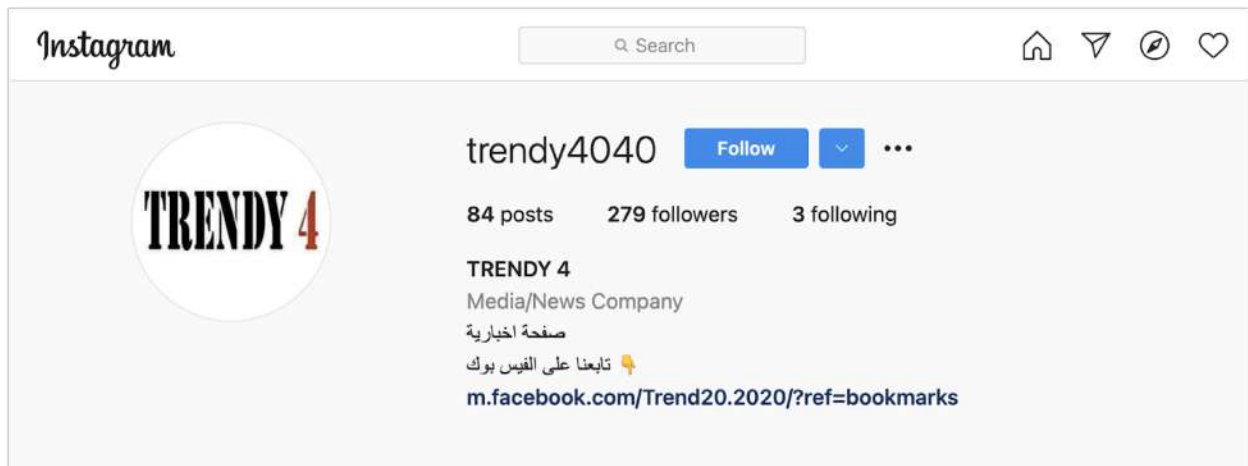
Name changes for the group "Lovers of Prime Minister Dr. Mustafa Madbouly"

Further speaking to this, the Facebook page for Trendy 4, which described itself as a "media/news company" and gained over 45,000 followers since it was created in 2016, was originally called "Crazy and magic trick" before changing its name in April 2020. The page has since been suspended by Facebook.



Page transparency information for Trendy4

An Instagram account for Trendy4 which linked to the suspended Facebook page has now also been removed. The account was active from April 2020 and posted 84 times, sharing a wide range of populist “news” content, often with the Trendy4 logo and links to the outlet’s social media accounts. Topics ranged from successful operations by the Egyptian army to updates on the Covid-19 pandemic, football and bodybuilding competitions. The account had 279 followers but only followed three others - the verified page for Egyptian President Abdel Fattah al-Sisi, a Bee Interactive employee, and another news outlet called Khat Seer.

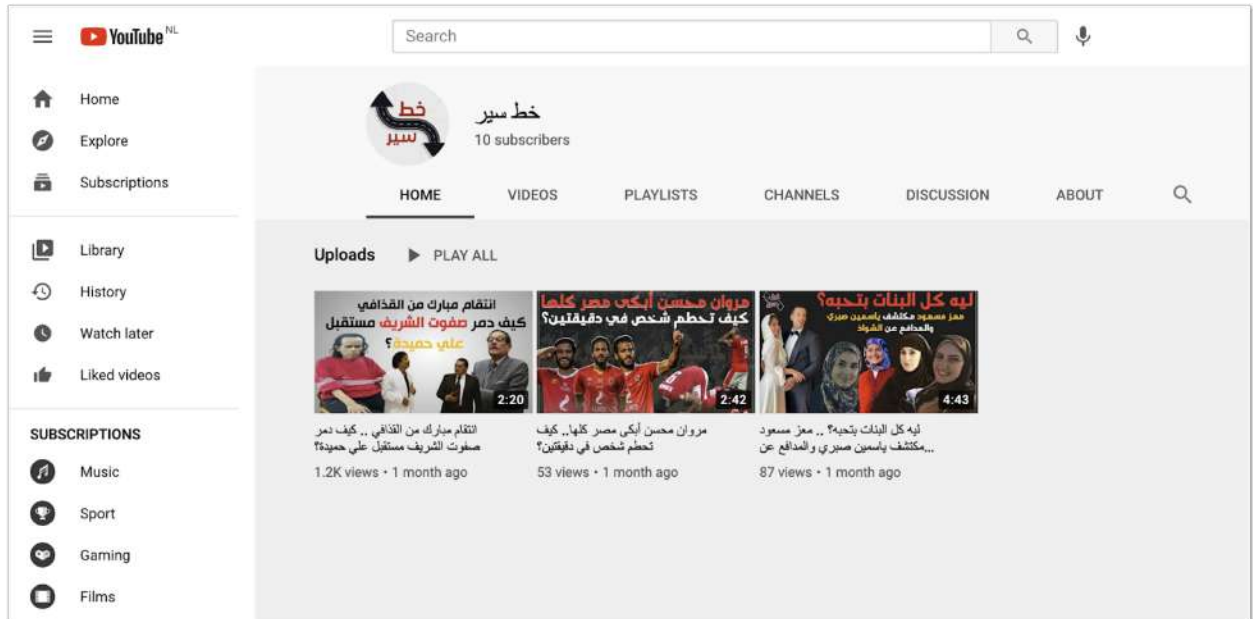


The Trendy4 Instagram account

Alongside Trendy4, Khat Seer was one of the three Egyptian-focused news outlets Graphika found with connections to Bee Interactive. Before they were suspended, the Khat Seer Facebook page had 234 followers and its Instagram account had 29. On Instagram, the outlet followed just one account - a Bee Interactive employee who also links to the Khat Seer YouTube channel from an online portfolio of his work. Like Trendy4, Khat Seer tended to post its own branded content about Egyptian celebrity news and current affairs. It seems likely the accounts were run by the Bee Interactive employee, either as an independent project or on behalf of a client.



A now-suspended account for Khat Seer on Instagram

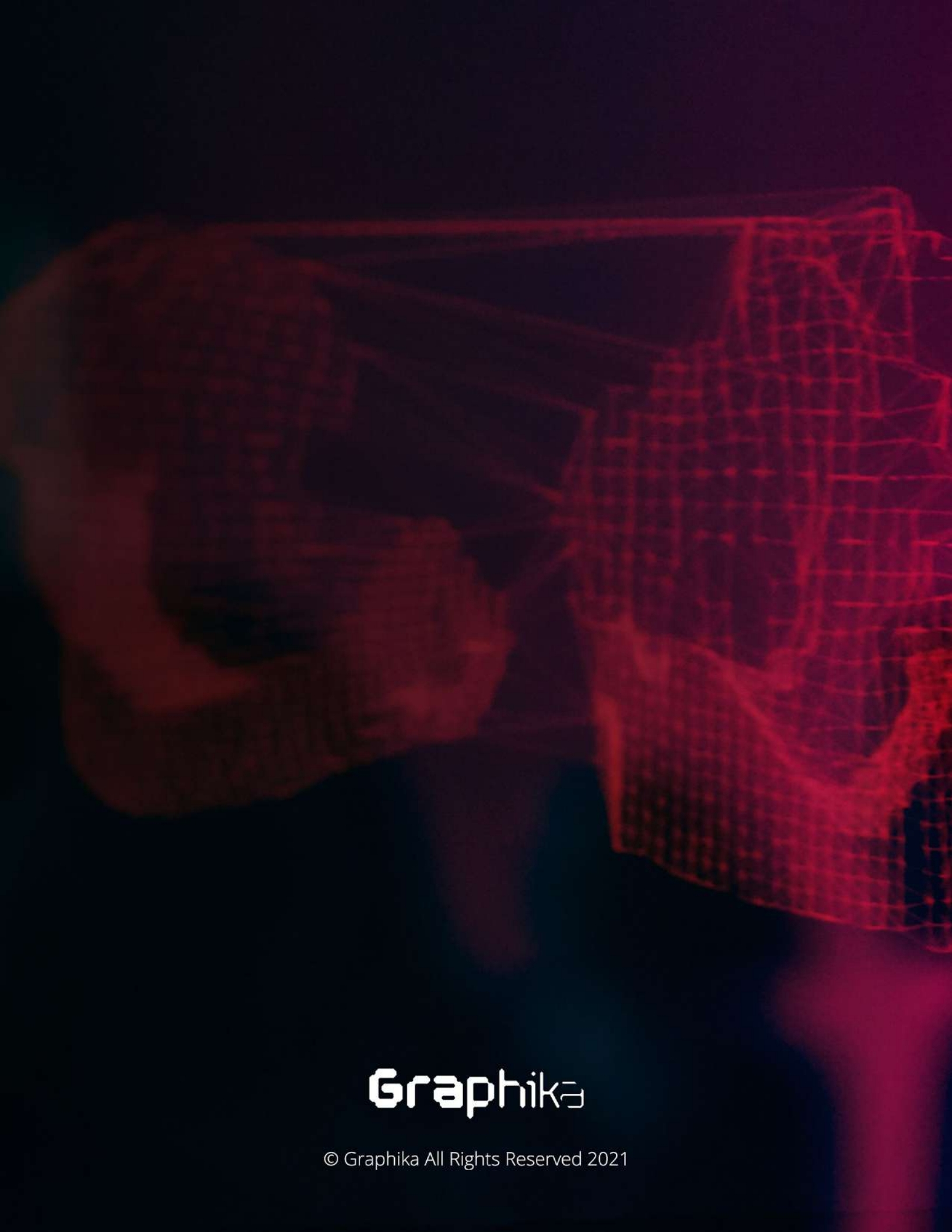


Active account for Khat Seer on YouTube

The third news outlet was called Masr Times and had a significantly more-developed social media presence, as well as a website - masrtimes[.]com. The Masr Times Facebook page was created in August 2020, has over 50,000 followers and links to accounts on Twitter, Instagram, YouTube and TikTok. The content seems original rather than re-posted from other sources but is visually similar in style to posts by Trendy4 and Khat Seer. Profiles linked to Bee Interactive also routinely shared posts by Masr Times and links to its website, suggesting it may be a company client.



Example of content from Masr Times



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