



Graphika

The Case of the Inauthentic Reposting Activists

Inauthentic Bilingual Network Targeting
Feminism, Black Lives Matter, and
Hispanic Communities in the U.S.

Ben Nimmo, Camille François,
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10.2020

Takedowns

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Acknowledgements

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If readers have additional information they'd like to contribute to this ongoing analysis, they can reach out to info@graphika.com.

Executive Summary

On October 27, Facebook [took down](#) a small network of inauthentic accounts, mostly on Instagram, that posted political, activist and engaging content about the United States in Spanish and English. The network was operated by people from Mexico and Venezuela. Neither Facebook nor Graphika at this stage was able to pinpoint the operator of this network with confidence. This report highlights the tactics and narratives shared by the inauthentic pages.

The network began posting in Spanish in April and added its first English-language accounts in July. It focused on a handful of core themes, primarily in the United States: Latinx identity and pride, the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement, uplifting and positive-thinking content, gender equality, LGBTQIA+ rights and the environment. The English-language content focused primarily on feminism and BLM. Very few posts referenced the impending U.S. election. A small number of the memes and images used in this campaign were previously used in Instagram-centric operations run by the Russian Internet Research Agency (IRA), but this is insufficient to attribute the activity.

Facebook said that it “began this investigation based on information about this network’s off-platform activity from the FBI.” In its statement announcing the takedown, it wrote that some of the people behind the activity appeared to be unwitting accomplices, but that the operation as a whole tried to conceal its coordination and “used fake accounts to create fictitious personas and post content.” This included some people claiming to work for a Poland-linked firm called “Social CMS” that did not appear to exist.

“Some of these accounts posed as Americans supporting various social and political causes and tried to contact others to amplify this operation’s content,” Facebook’s statement said.

Influence operations have been known to use unwitting accomplices in recent years: the IRA for instance has operated through unwitting accomplices in at least three operations focused on the U.S. 2020 presidential election in the past year. They are documented in the following Graphika reports: [Double Deceit](#), [Unlucky 13](#) and [Step Into My Parler](#).

The network had mixed success in building an audience. The most followed account, which mainly posted “Latinx life” humor and feel-good memes, had just over 14,000 followers when it was taken down. This was double the following of the next most popular account, which also posted humorous memes. Of the 22 Instagram accounts in the set, 15 had under 2,000 followers each. The operation appeared to still be in audience-building mode when it was taken down: it did not systematically promote a specific political message, but posted engaging and/or divisive content and invited users to react.

The Takedown Set

The network that Facebook removed consisted of 22 Instagram accounts and two Facebook pages; the latter had no posts and only one follower between them.

Fourteen of the Instagram accounts were in Spanish. These were primarily activated in two batches of six accounts each on April 21-22 and June 10-11, 2020. (Instagram accounts do not show a creation date, but the date of the first post serves as a proxy for their moment of activation for the purpose of this investigation.) The final two were activated on July 4 and July 23.

The remaining eight accounts operated in English. Five were activated in a batch on July 2-3, and the remaining three were activated between July 23 and July 27.

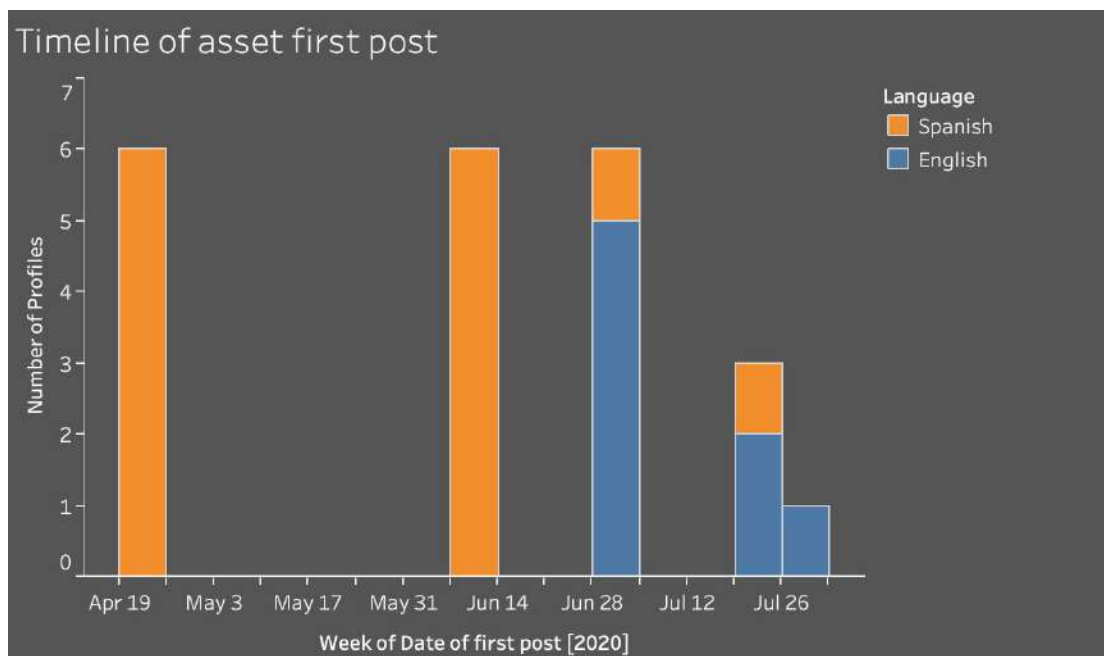


Chart showing the week in which each Instagram account made its first post, broken down by language.

The Spanish accounts focused on a range of subjects. Some, such as @vidamigrante ("migrant life") and @luchalatina.us ("Latinx struggle.US"), focused on the lives of Latinx in the United States. Others, such as @eltrendingoficial ("the official trending") and @los.optimistas ("the optimists"), were focused on themes of uplifting content and positive thinking. One, @aldeasustentable ("sustainable village"), focused on the environment and Native American concerns, especially in Latin America; another, @codigo_deportivo_mx ("Sports code Mexico") focused on sports.

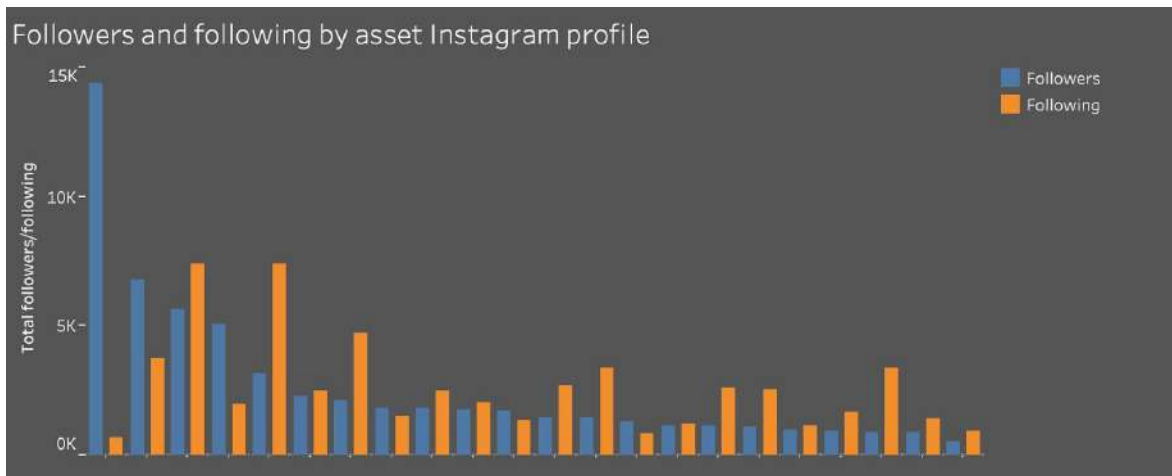
The English-language accounts were more overtly political. Six of the eight posted on either the Black Lives Matter movement and racism in the United States (@longliveblacks, @black.encounter and @powerful.black.voices) or on women's rights and feminism (@fem.cause, @femlead, @femfemglobe). One, @pray_tojesus, posted Christian memes, and the final one, @memexican.spicy, the most-followed asset in the operation, posted Latinx-focused comic memes. Sometimes, the BLM-focused accounts referred to America as "we" and Black communities as "us", demonstrating the operation's intent to pose as U.S.-based.



Post by @longliveblacks, referring to America as "we."

All told, the Spanish-language accounts posted some 3,700 times, while the English-language accounts posted around 2,200 times. The majority of these posts were copied from other users on Instagram or other platforms, such as screenshots of tweets or videos taken from TikTok.

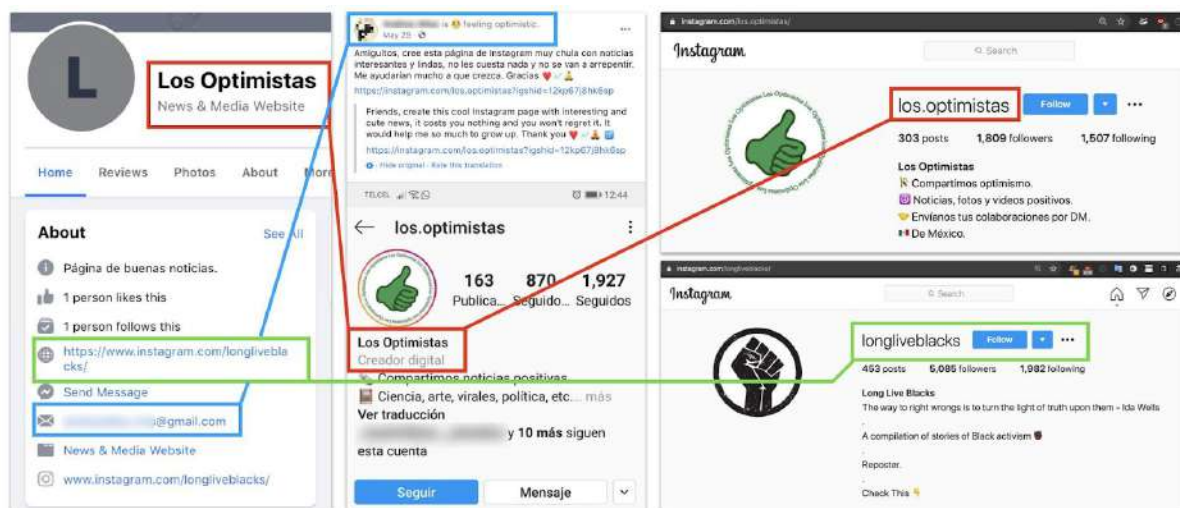
Their followings varied considerably. @memexican.spicy had over 14,000 followers by the time it was taken down; the next most-followed, @calditodememe ("hot meme"), had just under 7,000. The main BLM-focused account, @longliveblacks, had just over 5,000 followers. Fifteen of the other accounts, and all six remaining English-language ones, had under 2,000 followers each. With the exception of @memexican.spicy and @longliveblacks, most of the other accounts followed more accounts than they had followers.



Number of accounts following (blue) and followed by (orange) each Instagram account.

Several open-source clues indicate the connection between the Spanish- and English-language accounts, confirming that the accounts form one set despite the language split.

One of the two Facebook pages, created on May 22, was called Los Optimistas. It did not post any content and only had one follower. Its “About” section listed the Instagram account @longliveblacks under the “website” section. It also listed a gmail address for a user whose Facebook account claimed, on May 29, to have created the @los.optimistas Instagram account.



Left, details for the Facebook page Los Optimistas, which otherwise posted no content and had no followers. Note the link to the Instagram page @longliveblacks, and the gmail address. **Center**, post by an authentic user on Facebook whose name and online presence matched the gmail address, promoting the Los Optimistas Instagram account that they had recently created. **Upper right**, the Los Optimistas Instagram account. **Lower right**, the @longliveblacks account. (As some of the people involved in this activity appear to have been unaware of the nature of this interference operation, we have obscured their identities throughout this report.)

Facebook said that some of the people running these accounts “claimed to work for a Poland-linked firm Social CMS, which doesn’t appear to exist.” A LinkedIn account associated with one member of the network did indeed claim to be a content creator at Social CMS. The account was taken down before Graphika could analyze it, but traces remained in Google search. The gmail address associated with the Los Optimistas Facebook page included another user’s first name and surname, followed by “.cms.” These handful of indicators indeed suggest some form of coordinating entity behind the operation that called itself Social CMS. The name itself is too generic to be tied to a single entity at this stage (“CMS” is an abbreviation for, among other things, Content Management System).



Top, close-up of the About section of the Los Optimistas Facebook page, showing the .cms addition to the user’s gmail address. The obscured section showed the user’s name.

Bottom, screenshot of a Google search for the name of another of the individuals in this operation, showing their role as a content manager at Social CMS and their location in Mexico.

Sometimes, different accounts in the network posted the same content, or content with very similar messages, at the same time, further suggesting the connection between them.



Posts by @porsuvoz and @memejeres. Both were posted on June 27, but used an original [image](#) initially published by American actress Jari Jones on her verified Instagram account on June 22.

Themes and Content

Most of the network's content was taken from other sources. A high proportion of the posts were screenshots of tweets or other social media posts; many of the videos that it shared were copied from TikTok (discussed below). Within this pattern of copying, a clear set of thematic issues emerged, especially in the English content, which tended to be more tightly focused on political issues surrounding race, gender and sexuality.

U.S. Election 2020

Very little of the network's content dealt with the U.S. election: Graphika identified 27 posts that directly addresses the election or the candidates out of the almost 6,000 posts that the network generated in total. However, given the imminence of the vote and the concerns around foreign interference, we are exploring them in-depth in the below section.

Most references were factual, sometimes with engaging comments at the end of the post, along the lines of "what do you think of this?" Two posts from Spanish-language account @luchalatina.us urged Latinx citizens to vote, without specifying a preference for a candidate. Other posts flagged events such as the presidential and vice-presidential debates, but without expressing a preference either.



@luchalatinas.us calling Latinx to go vote. The left-hand post reads "Don't forget to vote!" The right-hand post reads, "It is time to make our voices count, regardless of political preference, the important thing is to exercise our right to choose the next leader of the United States."



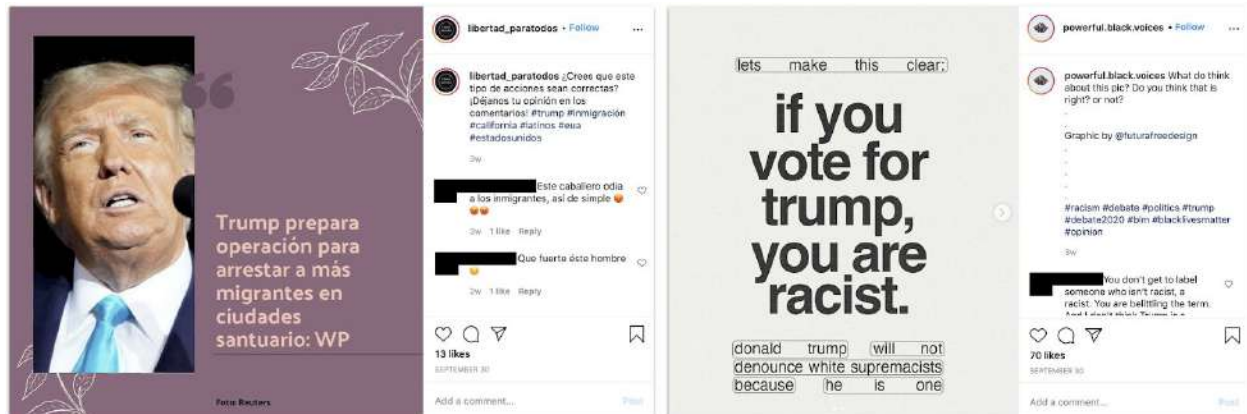
Factual posts ahead of the vice-presidential and presidential debates. The left-hand post says that it is "important to take the time to get to know the current governors and possible candidates who will lead the U.S." The right-hand post says when and where the debate will be.

A few posts focused on leading figures including vice-presidential candidate Kamala Harris and President Donald Trump, their actions, and policies. The language used to refer to Harris was broadly positive and focused on her positions with regard to immigration policies, whereas posts that mentioned Biden were more about his campaign's promises than about him as an individual, and asked users what they thought about those promises.



Posts in Spanish and English about vice-presidential candidate Kamala Harris. The Spanish post emphasizes that Harris has a personal interest in immigration policy and supports the protection of the “[Dreamers](#)” and asks whether readers believe she could be a positive change.

Some content about President Trump pictured him in a negative or mocking light, especially on the basis of his policies towards immigrants, notably Mexican ones.



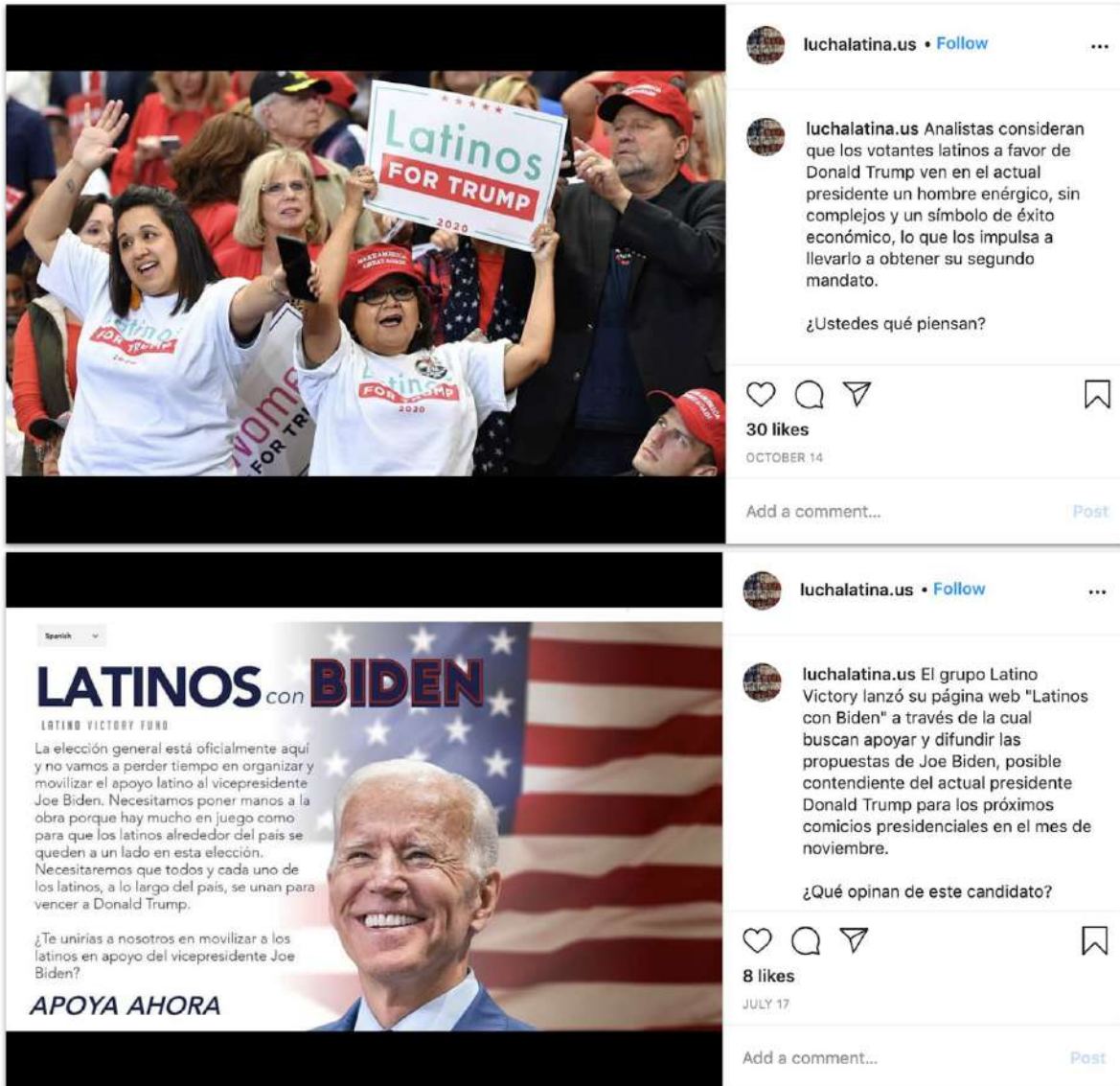
Left, post on Trump preparing an operation to arrest migrants in sanctuary cities. The post asked users to comment whether they thought he was right. **Right**, an explicitly anti-Trump post from @powerful.black.voices.

This set did not stick with one political “side” or line. For instance, a handful of posts covered the White House's policies to tackle the Covid-19 pandemic in a positive way.



Posts in Spanish about Trump approving unemployment assistance and a stimulus package.

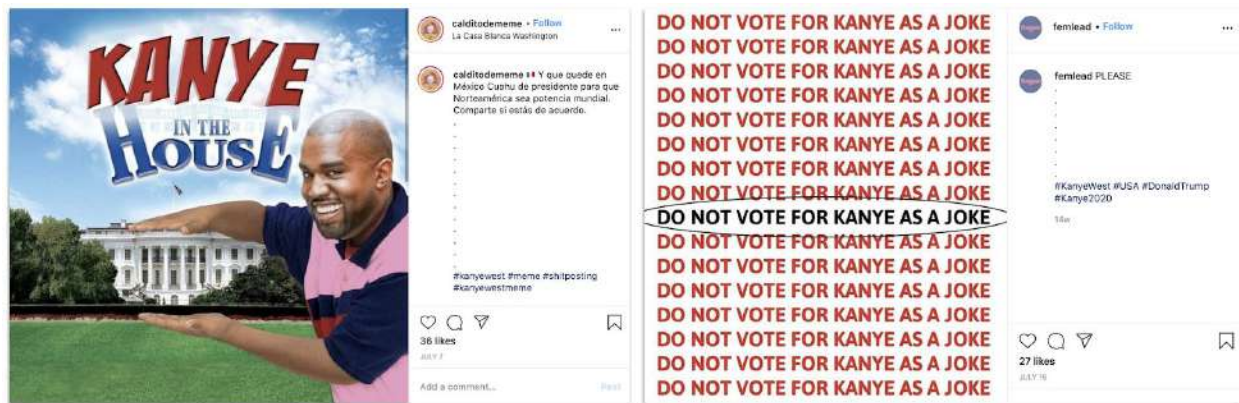
Overall, the operation appeared to be broadly balanced, with no one candidate dominating the election-focused posts. This is best exemplified by two posts by @luchalatina.us. One was about hispanic support for Biden, the other was about hispanic support for Trump, and both asked users what they thought.



Top, post by luchalatina.us on Latinos for Trump. The text reads, "Analysts consider that Latinx voters who support Trump see in the current president an energetic man, without complexes and a symbol of economic success, which makes them want to deliver him a second term. What do you think?"

Bottom, post by the same account on Latinxs con Biden. It focuses on support by the group "Latino Victory for Biden," and asks readers what they think of him.

A very small number of posts also mentioned the candidacy of Kanye West, mostly in a negative way.

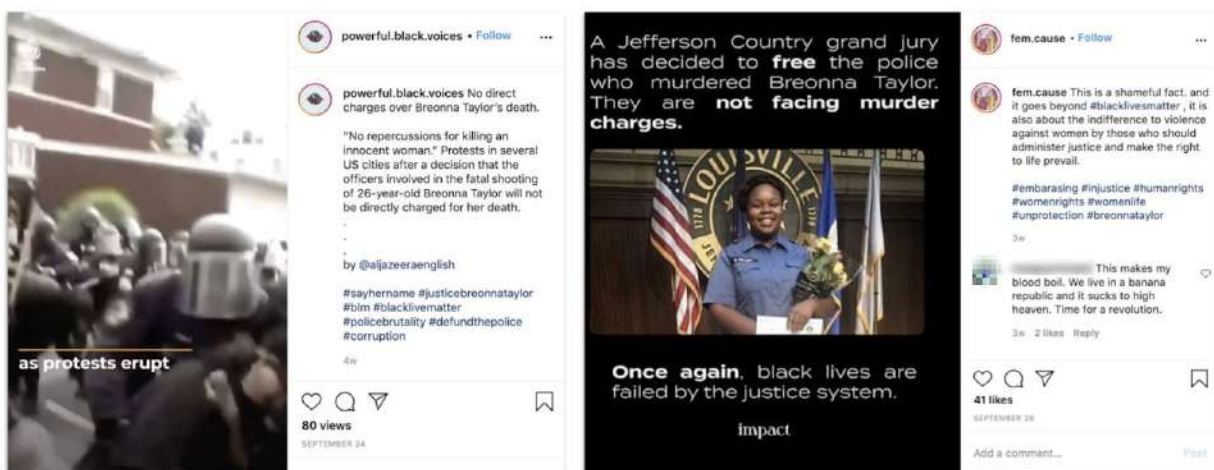


Posts about Kanye West's presidential ambitions.

Overall, explicitly election-related content made up a very small proportion of the network's posts, compared with the volume of content that it posted about broader social and political topics.

Black Lives Matter

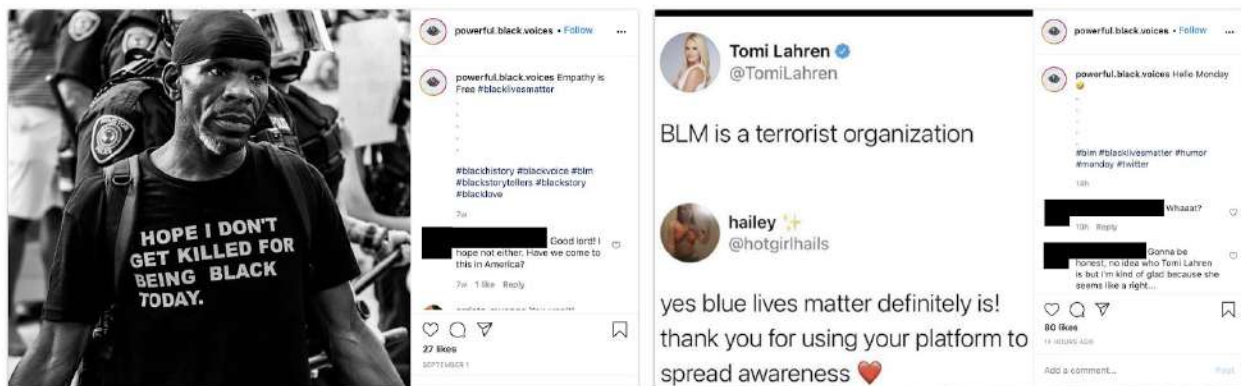
Three of the English-language accounts focused explicitly on Black rights, especially in the context of police violence. Some of the other accounts in both English and Spanish also focused explicitly on these issues. Together, the three BLM-centric accounts generated almost 1,000 posts, one sixth of all the operation's output.



Posts by @powerful.black.voices, left, and @fem.cause, right, on a judge's decision not to bring direct charges over the killing of Breonna Taylor.



Spanish-language posts by @vidamigrante, left, and @libertad_paratodos, right, on the killing of George Floyd.



Posts by @powerful.black.voices on broader issues of race and police violence.

Alongside the political commentary, the operation's assets posted positive stories about Black leaders and inspiring role models, both from current events and from history.



Posts by @longliveblacks on positive modern Black examples in the United States.



Post by @powerful.black.voices on black inventors.

Mexicans and Migrants in the U.S.

Many posts in both Spanish and English (and a combination of the two) focused on the everyday lives of immigrants, especially Mexican immigrants, in the United States. Some of these had no discernible political intent and appeared designed to attract an audience with humor. Others covered the politics of discrimination, poverty and immigration, with a particular focus on the U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement service, ICE.

One account, @vidamigrante, focused on the issues of immigration, race and detention. It showed a particular interest in reports of migrant “caravans” coming from Latin America towards the U.S.



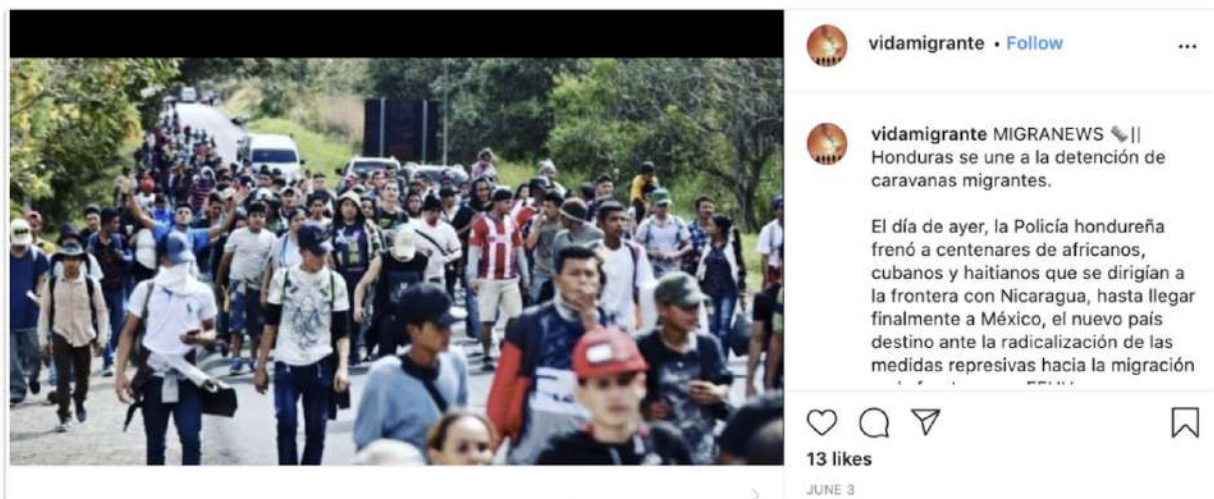
Humorous videos shared by the operation on hispanic and Mexican identity, and copied from viral TikTok posts



Posts on North American attitudes to latinx communities (left) and racial stereotyping in movies (right).



Two posts on ICE from @luchalatina.us.



Typical post by @vidamigrante on the police in Honduras detaining African, Cuban and Haitian migrants.

Feminism

Three other English-language accounts and two Spanish-language ones focused on feminism. As with the BLM trinity, the English ones had related names (@femlead, @fem.cause, and @femfemglobe); the Spanish ones were called @porsuvoz (“by your voice”) and @memejeres (a play on the words for “meme” and “women”, roughly equivalent to “womemes”). They combined political posts with uplifting commentary about positive role models and empowering examples. Together, these five accounts generated some 1,400 posts.



Post by @femfemglobe on the fall of the patriarchy, referencing a popular meme.



Posts by @fem.cause on consent and abortion.



Post by @porsuvoz on Mexican revolutionary [Adela Velarde Perez](#).

A handful of posts focused on inspiring political figures. On the liberal side, these included Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, Michelle Obama and Tulsi Gabbard. These women were typically presented as feminist icons fighting for the rights of immigrant communities and minorities in United States: the posts about them were thus in keeping with the ostensible main themes of the feminism-focused and migration-focused accounts.



The post on the left quotes Barack Obama on the United States' unique nature as a country born from immigration. The one on the right, @memejeres - which uses pictures of inspirational women to make memes - promotes Michelle Obama. The meme reads, "Me when I see people in masks greeting each other with a kiss." The accompanying text describes her career as "the First Lady with the most personality."

Not all the examples they chose were liberal, however. Two other women covered in these posts were Britain's Conservative prime ministers Margaret Thatcher (known as the "Iron Lady") and Theresa May; Ivanka Trump was also mentioned. These women were featured as leaders in their respective careers in memes that showcased photos of them, together with comic texts.



Posts about Margaret Thatcher from @porsuvoz and @memejeres. The left-hand post marked 1979 as the year Thatcher was elected prime minister (in an indication of her controversial image, a comment below the post warned that Argentinian readers would not forgive her order to sink the warship the General Belgrano during the Falklands War). The right-hand meme reads, "Me hiding my nerves on family calls," the text is a brief biography.



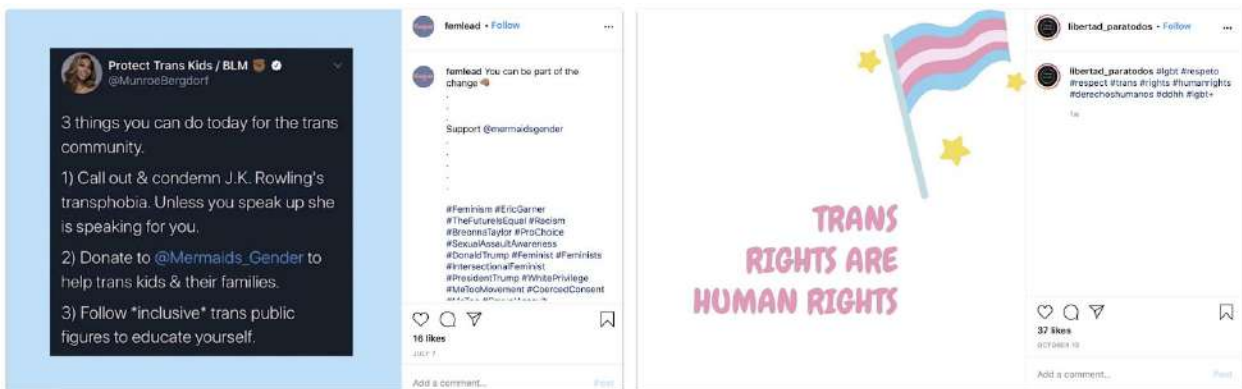
Left, meme about Ivanka Trump reading, "When they grab your phone and you know that you've got nudes in your photos." **Right**, meme about Theresa May reading, "Me lip-reading a conversation to get the gossip." In each case, the accompanying text is a brief biography without editorial comment.

LGBTQIA+

Some of the accounts also paid attention to broader issues of sexuality and the rights of LGBTQIA+ people. Unlike with feminism or BLM, the operation did not have a single account dedicated to the issue: rather, different accounts posted about it at different times, typically calling for greater rights and more tolerance. LGBTQIA+ rights was, alongside anti-racism, immigration and feminism, one of the main topics covered by the set.



Posts on sexuality by @fem.cause and @eltrendingoficial. The right-hand post is headlined "Unity makes strength" and concerns a Pride parade in Mexico City.



Posts on trans rights by @femlead and @libertad_paratodos.

Environment

One Spanish-language account focused on environmental issues and the rights and struggles of Native American communities, especially in Latin America. This was @aldeasustentable (“sustainable village”), one of the first accounts to begin activity on April 21, 2020. It had just over 1,700 followers by the time of the takedown.



"Latin America, the region where most environmental defenders are murdered."



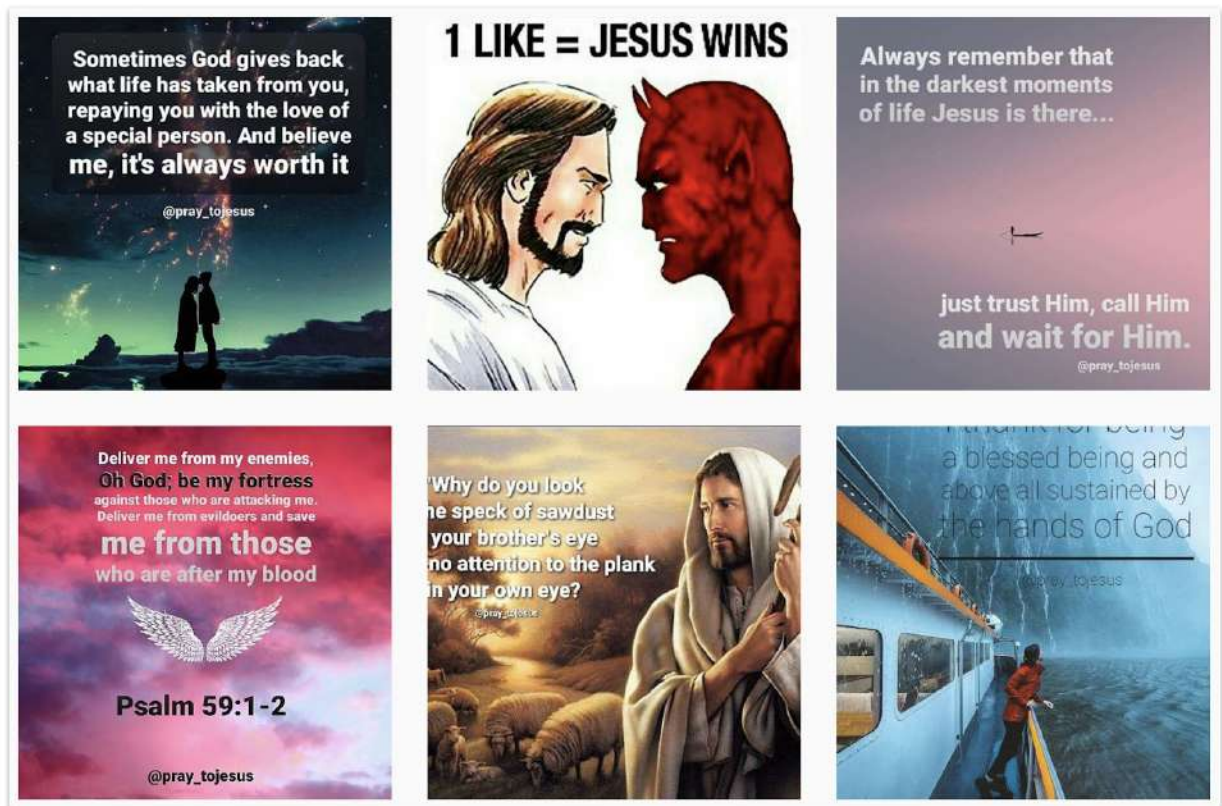
"Will there be new pandemics in the near future? The answer is yes." Post on human-to-animal disease transmission caused by over-exploitation of resources.



Post describing an outbreak of COVID-19 in an Amazon tribe as “biological warfare” and blaming it on illegal gold miners.

Jesus

One English-language account was an outlier in the set. This was called @pray_tojesus, and posted Christian memes focused on questions of faith and endurance. The account did not seek to blend these with political messages: none of its posts mentioned political or electoral topics. It was the last of the operation's accounts to be activated, on July 27. At the time of the takedown it had 1,156 followers and was following 1,181 other accounts.



Posts from the timeline of @pray_tojesus, showing typical content.

Viral Content

In between the systematic topics described above, the operation posted content on a wide range of trending, topical or otherwise potentially viral topics, most likely in an attempt to establish a character and build an audience. Both of its most-followed accounts, @memexican.spicy and @calditodememe, focused explicitly on re-posting such memes. Some posted humorous memes in amongst their more political content. Others posted cute animal videos taken from other online sources, especially ones that had already gone viral.

On a few occasions, the accounts posted about more serious breaking stories, notably the inexorable rise in COVID-19 cases around the world, but even here, some of the treatment was irreverent, such as its portrayal of President Trump recovering by consuming traditional Mexican food.



Posts by @memexican.spicy. With over 14,000 followers, this was the operation's most followed asset, with over double the number of followers of the next most popular.



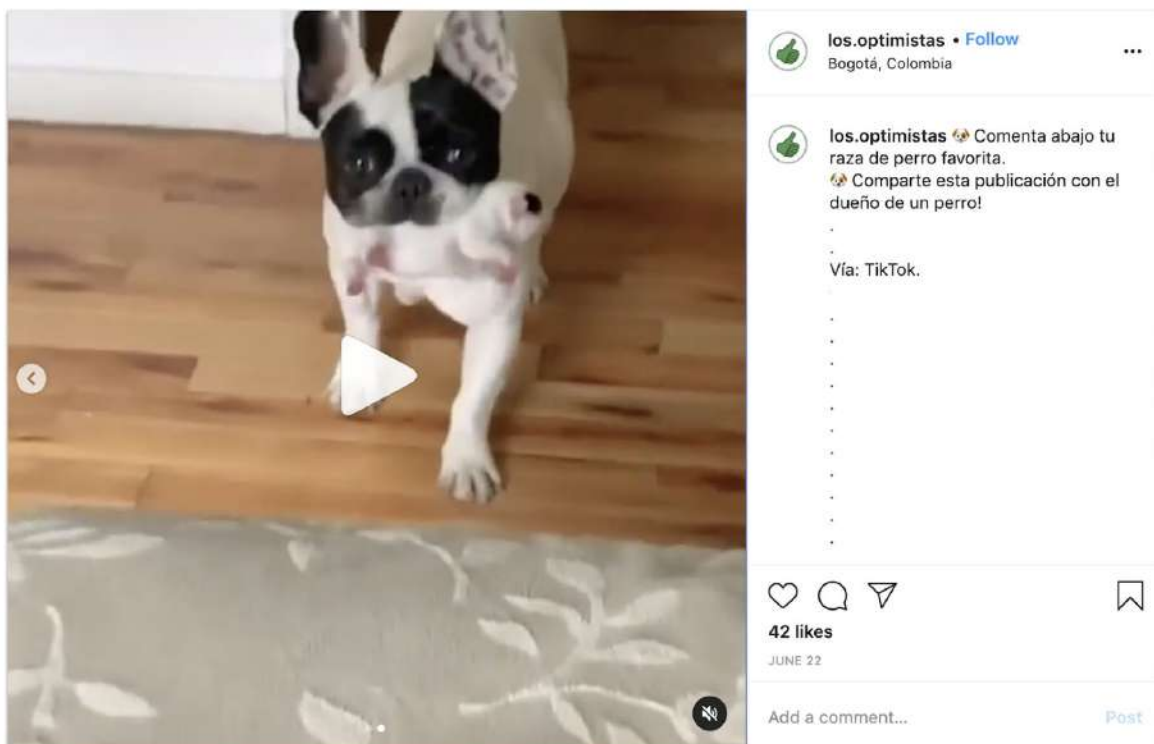
Comparisons of North and Latin American styles by @calditodememe. Note the high viewing figures. The post of the left mocks 'White American moms', depicted as full of stereotypes against Mexicans.



Trump recovering in bed with VapoRub and a bowl of soup, courtesy of @calditodememe, the second most followed account.



Posts on COVID-19 from @femlead and @carcajadota.

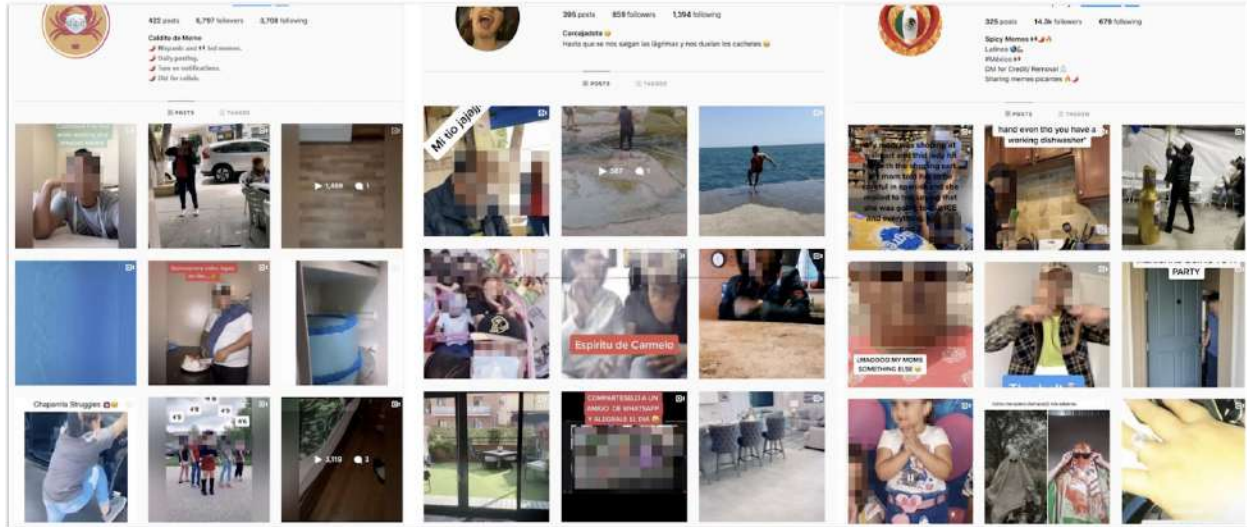


Puppy video by @los.optimistas. The original had 1.6 million views.

Content Sources

Tik Tok

One of the noteworthy aspects of this operation was the extent to which some of its accounts, especially the more human-interest and less political ones, repurposed content from TikTok. It is not the first time Graphika has seen influence operations use TikTok as a source of content - the political spam network Spamouflage Dragon [1,2,3] that we first reported in September 2019 regularly spammed TikTok videos from unrelated users between its political posts on YouTube. It underscores this operation's desire to build its audience through engaging content drawn from a wide variety of viral social media sources.



The Instagram feeds of Caldito de Memes, Carajadota and Spicy Memes consisted almost exclusively of stolen TikTok videos.

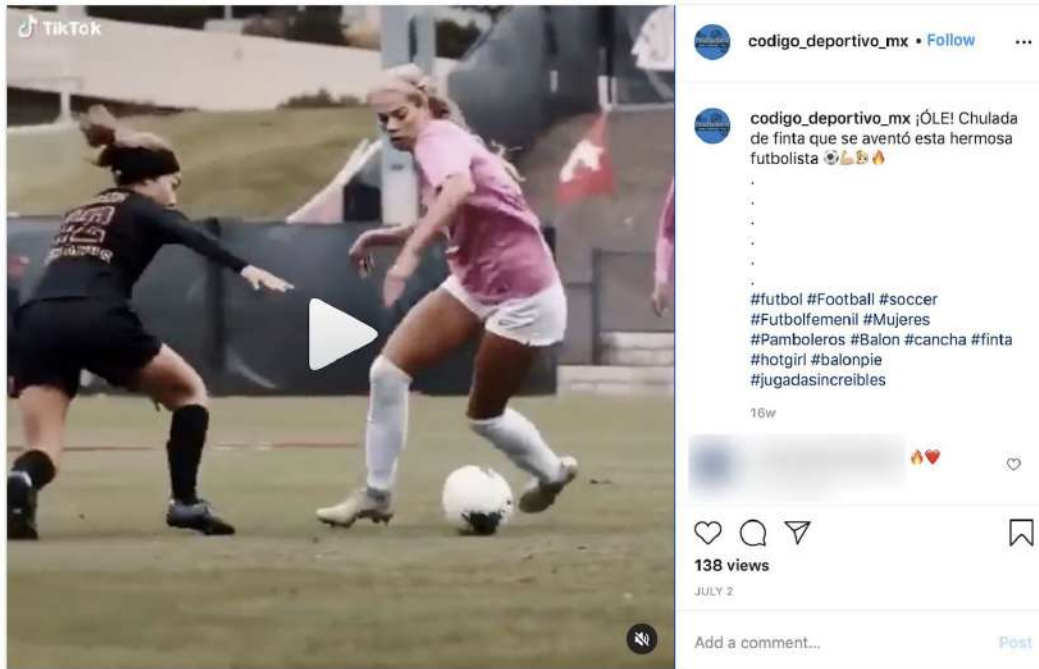
Most of the videos were focused on engaging themes such as pets, funny moments and celebrations. Unlike Spamouflage, many of the posts gave appropriate credit both to the content creators and to Tiktok itself: this was not an attempt to illicitly claim credit for others' productions, rather an attempt to leverage them to build engagement.



Instagram post by operation asset @los.optimistas showing a viral French Bulldog moment. The post prominently credited TikTok as its source, and named the original author. The original post had 1.6 million views.



Instagram post by @calditodememe sharing a TikTok video. Note the high number of views. The original post on TikTok was from a user with 246,000 followers and gained 67,000 likes.



*Instagram post by @codigo_deportivo_mx sharing a TikTok video.
The original post on TikTok was from a user with 813,000 followers
and received 616,000 likes at the time of analysis.*

Other Platforms

Other accounts, especially the more political ones, generated much of their content by re-posting other Instagram users' posts, or else by screenshotting posts from authentic users on other platforms and posting them with a short comment and a request for engagement. This was done overtly and often with appropriate credit: the account @longliveblacks said in its bio that it was a reposter; the feminist account @femlead systematically tagged its sources.



Post by @femlead showing both its source on Twitter (an account with 115,000 followers) and Instagram (151,000 followers).



Post by @longliveblacks screenshotting a tweet on police violence.

Content Previously Posted by IRA Assets

One subset of activity on the more political accounts, especially in English, included content that had previously been posted by the Russian Internet Research Agency. Graphika has identified almost twenty cases in which assets in the takedown network posted images and memes that had previously been shared by IRA accounts of the 2016-17 vintage, together with some looser matches of content and theme.

These similarities are suggestive rather than conclusive. However, they do raise questions about the origins of this network that merit further investigation.

The matches between IRA memes and memes in the latest set are shown below.

Former IRA Asset @feminism.tag

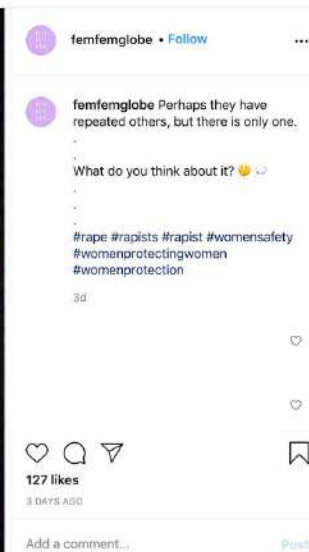
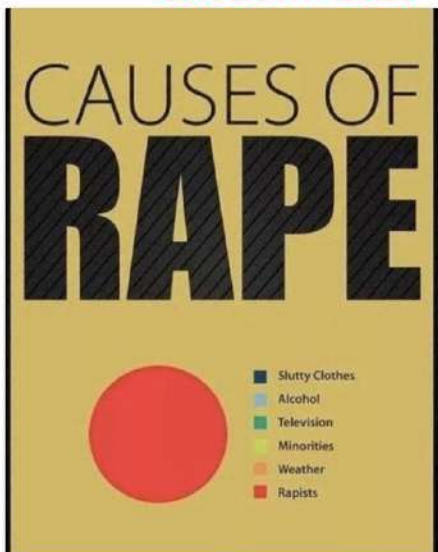
Takedown 2020



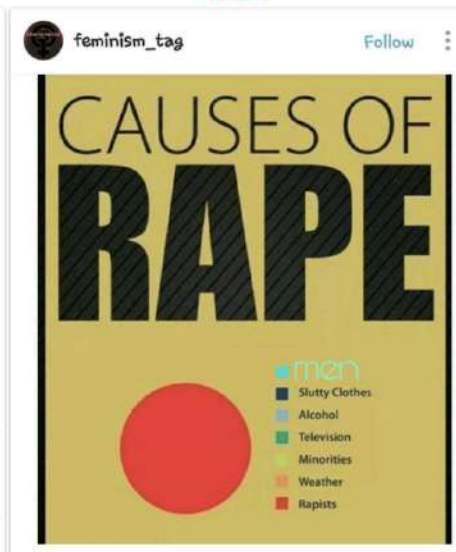
IRA



Takedown 2020



IRA



Takedown 2020



"Girls over 130 lbs shouldn't-"

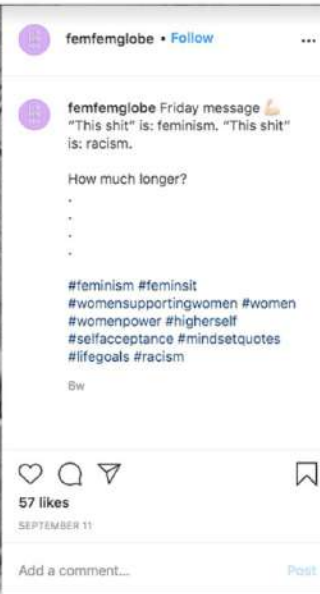


IRA



"Girls over 130 lbs shouldn't-"

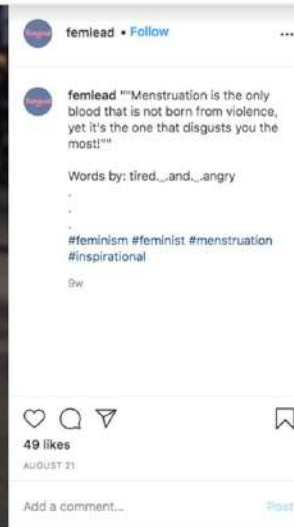
Takedown 2020



IRA



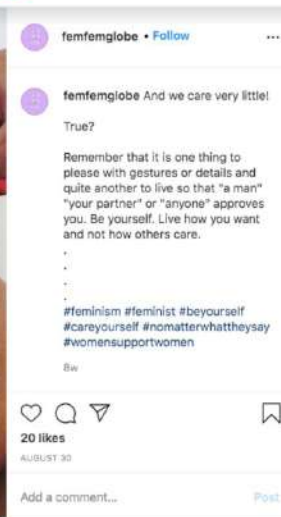
Takedown 2020



IRA



Takedown 2020



IRA



Former IRA Asset “Nefertiti Community”

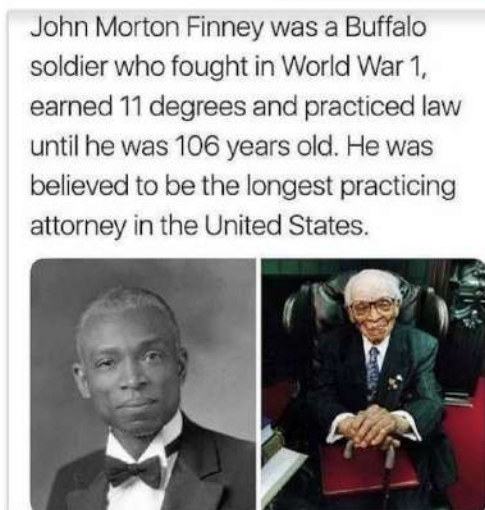
Takedown 2020



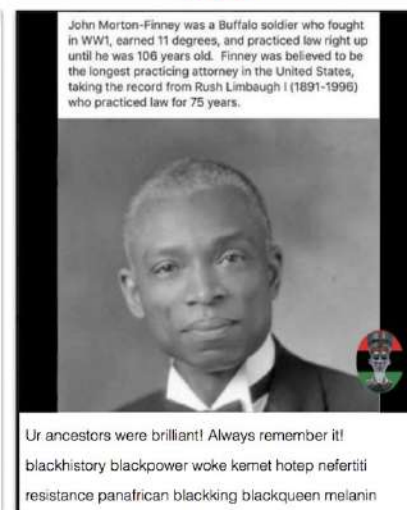
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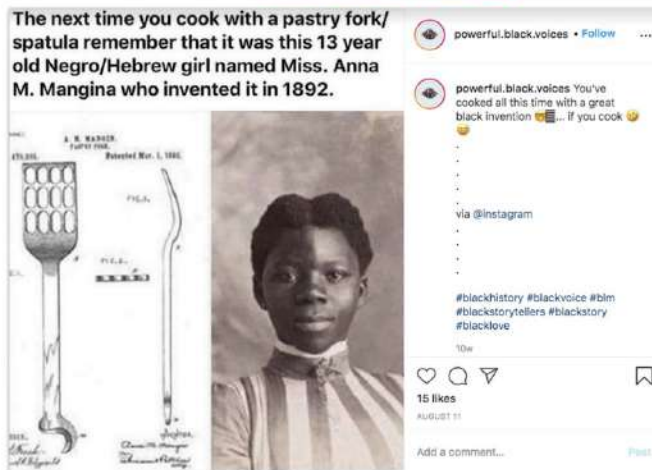
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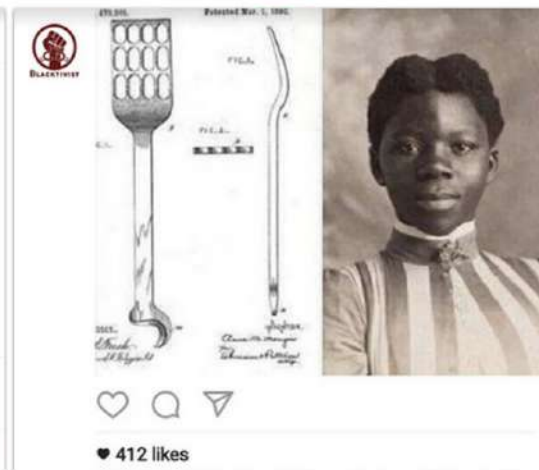
IRA



Takedown 2020



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Takedown 2020



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Takedown 2020



IRA



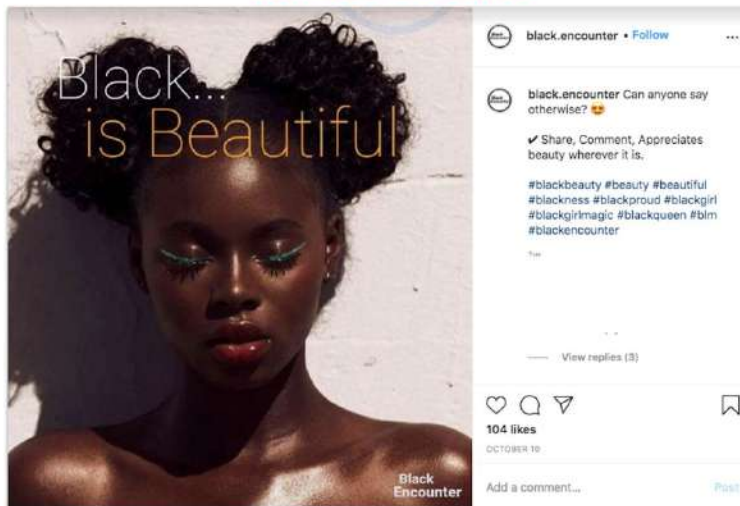
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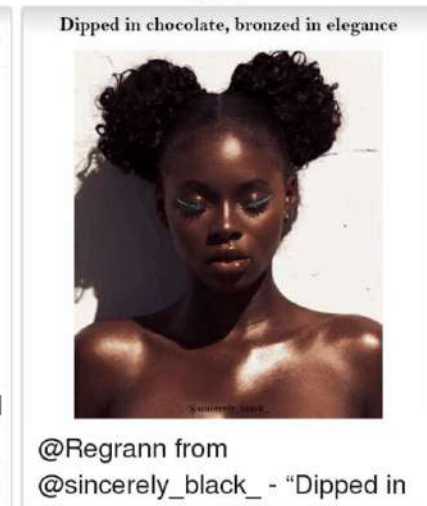
IRA



Takedown 2020



IRA



Takedown 2020



IRA



Former IRA Asset @panafrican.roots

Takedown 2020

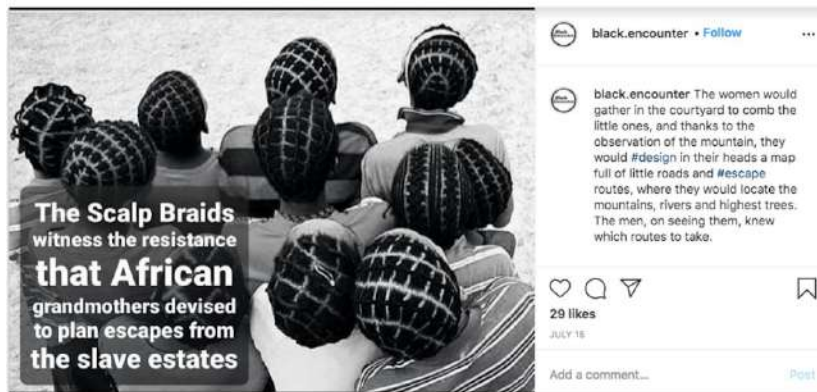


IRA

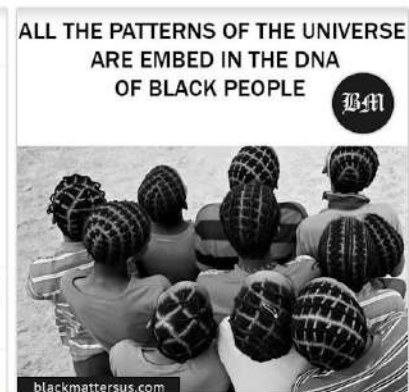


Former IRA Asset Black Matters US

Takedown 2020



IRA



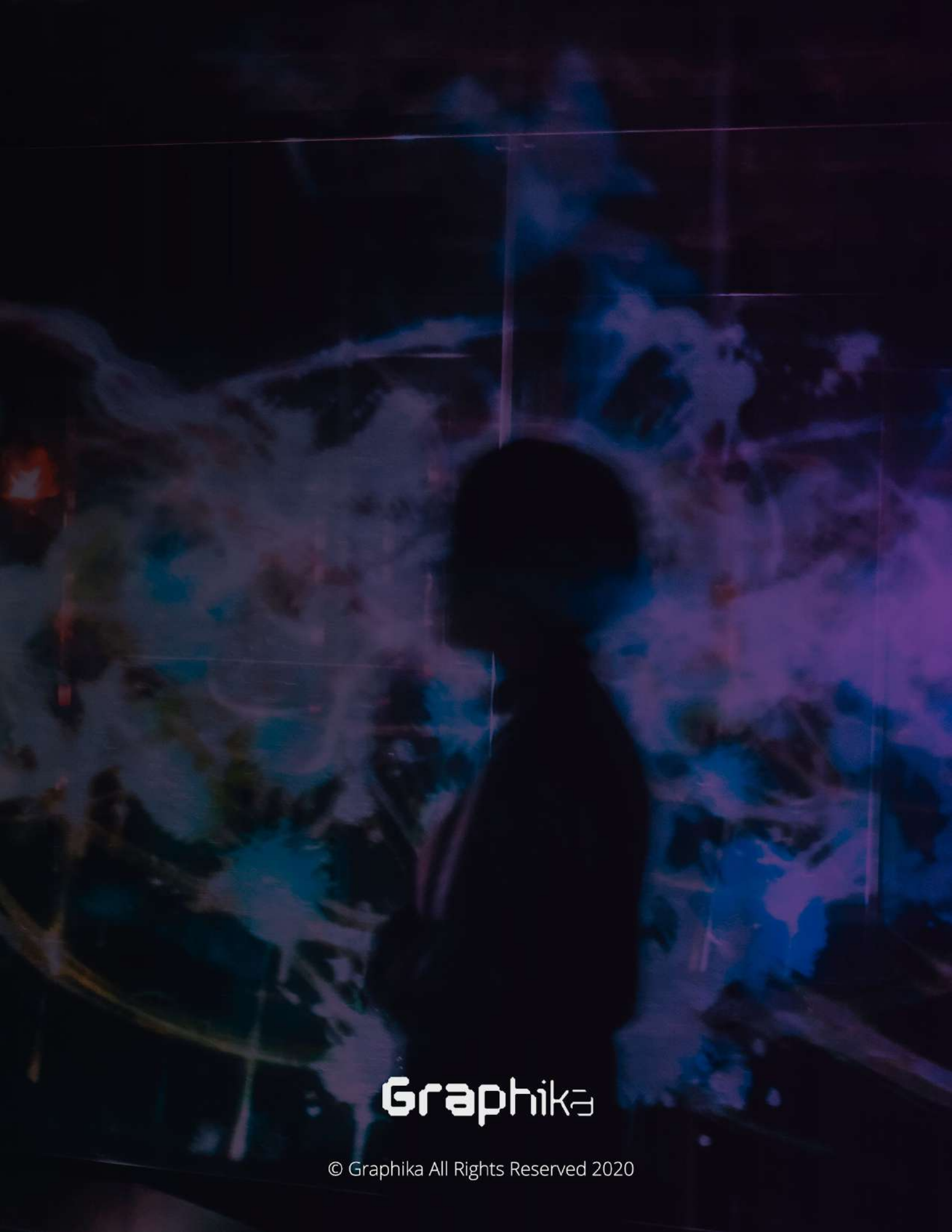
Former IRA Asset @blackbusiness_

Takedown 2020



IRA





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