

Fighting disinformation on social networks in Hong Kong

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Key Points

- Twitter, Facebook and Google suspended thousands of accounts for “coordinated inauthentic behaviour” in Hong Kong.
- The platforms’ operators claimed that accounts were associated with state-backed entities.

Summary

On August 19, Twitter disclosed¹ “a significant state-backed information operation focused on the situation in Hong Kong, specifically the protest movement and their calls for political change.” According to Twitter, 936 accounts originating from within the People’s Republic of China were deliberately and specifically attempting to sow political discord in Hong Kong, including undermining the legitimacy and political positions of the protest movement on the ground. These 936 accounts allegedly formed the most active portion of a larger network of approximately 200,000 accounts, which were also proactively suspended. Incriminated accounts were forming large clusters to amplify messages related to the Hong Kong protests. Twitter also claimed to have reliable evidence to support that this is a coordinated state-backed operation.

The same day, Facebook stated² that “[It] removed seven Pages, three Groups and five Facebook accounts involved in coordinated inauthentic behaviour as part of a small network that originated in China and focused on Hong Kong.” According to Facebook, actors used fake accounts to manage Pages posing as news organizations, post in Groups, disseminate their content as well as drive people to off-platform news sites. Facebook also indicated that although people behind these activities attempted to conceal their identities, Facebook’s investigation found links to individuals associated with the Chinese government.

On August 22, Google announced³ that “as part of our ongoing efforts to combat coordinated influence operations, [it] disabled 210 channels on YouTube when [it] discovered channels in this network behaved in a coordinated manner while uploading videos related to the ongoing protests in Hong Kong. This discovery was consistent with recent observations and actions related to China announced by Facebook and Twitter.” According to Google, entities behind these activities used virtual private networks (VPNs) and other methods to disguise the origin of their accounts.

Comments

As the three social network giants have been facing criticism due to their failure to fight politically motivated disinformation campaigns leveraging their platforms, they seem to be willing to ramp up efforts in that field. Accounts’ suspensions practices implemented during the Hong Kong crisis are therefore illustrative of their current operational capacities to fight disinformation in near real time.

The three social network giants reacted and publicly communicated in a rather short timeframe: all communications were released within four days and two of them the same day.

Furthermore, the most recent announcement (Google) refers to the two others, a possible way to indicate a shared sense of responsibility. It is unclear however if and how the platforms’ operators cooperate. The platforms’ reactions come as the crisis is still ongoing, indicating a good level of reactivity. In at least one case (Twitter), the suspensions were made even before the accounts became active.

Finally, two of them refer to state-backed operations: “individuals associated with the Chinese government” (Facebook), “state-backed operation” (Twitter), while Google indirectly refers to “Government-backed attackers” in its statement. This indicates that the platforms’ operators have all likely developed an attribution capability and that they are ready to publicly name the alleged origin of the campaigns. In other words, their reaction is not just operational (suspension of accounts) but it also has a political dimension (public political attribution).

In the past few months, social networks have suspended⁴ thousands of accounts they believed to be associated to the Russian, the Iranian, and the Venezuelan governments. Although social networks like Twitter, Facebook or YouTube are often blocked in such countries, this does not prevent entities there from accessing such platforms using VPNs.

1 https://blog.twitter.com/en_us/topics/company/2019/information_operations_directed_at_Hong_Kong.html

2 <https://newsroom.fb.com/news/2019/08/removing-cib-china/>

3 <https://blog.google/outreach-initiatives/public-policy/maintaining-integrity-our-platforms/>

4 <https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2019/aug/19/twitter-china-hong-kong-accounts>