

Twitter Thread by Ben Nimmo



Ben Nimmo

@benimmo



Great report by @satariano on a fake network that @Graphika NYC (and others) found in December.

Twitter accounts with GAN faces, boosting Huawei, boosted by Huawei execs, and attacking Belgium's 5G policies.

Not enough evidence to prove who ran them.

We found this network when it was boosted by Spamouflage, a pro-China operation.

Independently, @mvanhulten of @TI_EU and @ArbiterOfTweets of @Knack found it with different methods.

It's not a friendly environment for fake campaigns, folks.

<https://t.co/ASpAmH4ukz>

This was the first account we found.

"Alexandre, PhD", apparently a CEO.

But no surname, no indication of what he's a CEO of, and a GAN-generated profile pic.



Follow

Alexandre , PhD

@alexandre_phd

Educator | CEO | [#Telcos](#) [#5G](#) [#AI](#) [#IoT](#) [#DataAnalytics](#)

📍 Brussels 📅 Joined October 2017

107 Following **2,374** Followers

Alexandre's had a bit of an obsession with Belgium and #5G recently.

Especially, Belgium's security limitations on 5G providers, which are reportedly mainly about Huawei and ZTE.

Alexandre didn't like the Belgian approach much.



Alexandre , PhD @alexandre_phd · Dec 18

...

Trust and a deep sense of insecurity is induced by lack of transparency coz it inhibits network vendors' risk evasion due to diversity. In turn, uncertainty will also come to access to the Belgian 5G Market - this is a bad news frm a security point of view!



Belgium and 5G – a complicated relationship
Belgium is a country with wonderful traditions, culture, and a rich history. Known around the wor...
johannesdrooghaag.com

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13

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Alexandre , PhD @alexandre_phd · Dec 17

...

If the Belgian Government ordered mobiles operators to bear the extra cost, Consumers will have to pay higher prices for 5G and even the existing 4G, and the roll out of 5G in Belgium will be seriously delayed.



Mobile operators question Belgian Government's ...
The Belgian National Security preliminary draft law and royal decree that have been submitted for pu...
newyorkglobe.co



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Alexandre , PhD @alexandre_phd · Dec 16

...

This is a crucial time for Covid-19 hit economies all over the world and if Belgium government exclude some 5G vendors altogether from participation in provision of 5G equipment, it will be a major blow to its economy.



5G: If the Belgian government exclude specific suppliers, who will pay for it?
toplinenews.eu



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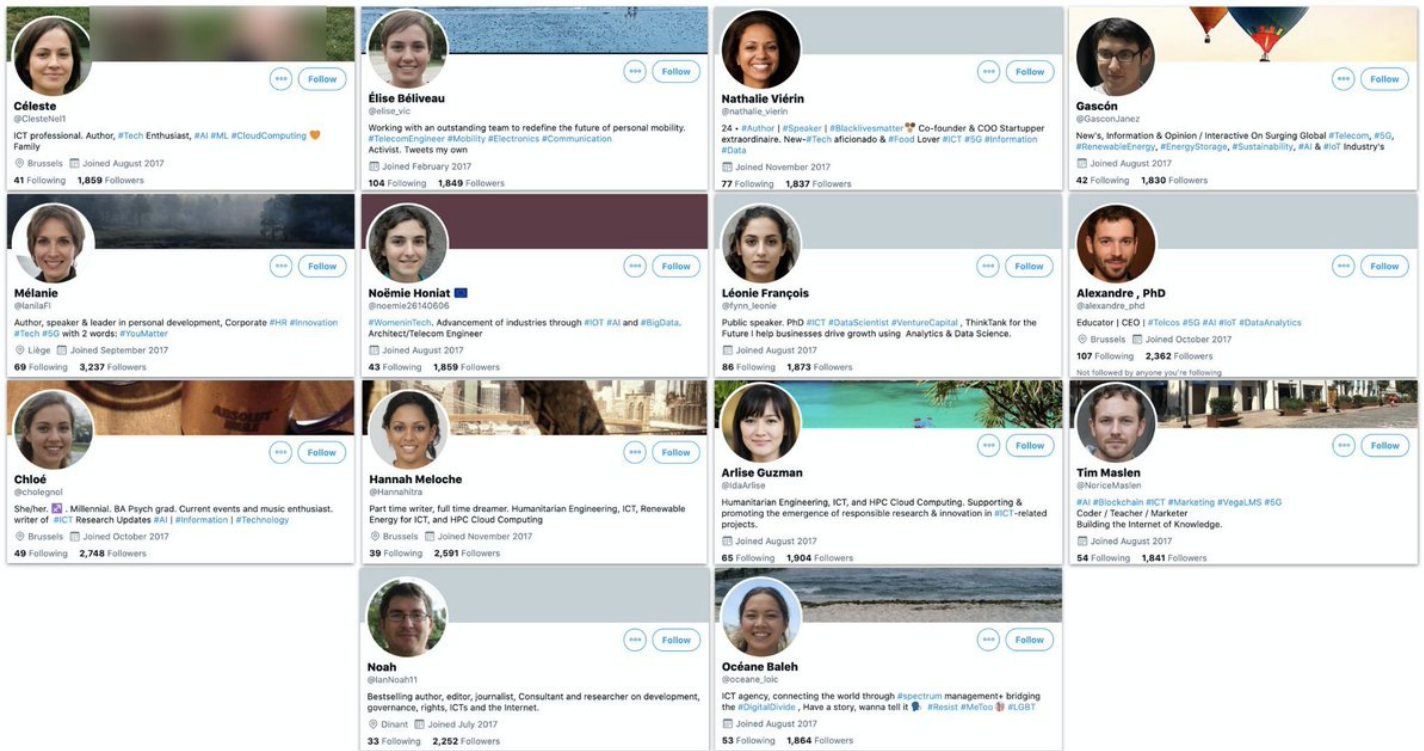


The account was created in 2017. It only started tweeting in early December, 2020, but its first posts were retweets of tweets from November 2017-18.

They were meant to be about VR, as in virtual reality. Oddly, one was actually about Victorian Railways in Australia. Awkward.



Pivoting off that account, we found 13 more that were behaving the same way, created around the same time, and all had GAN faces and similar bios - including a "best-selling author" who, um, didn't name any of his actual books.



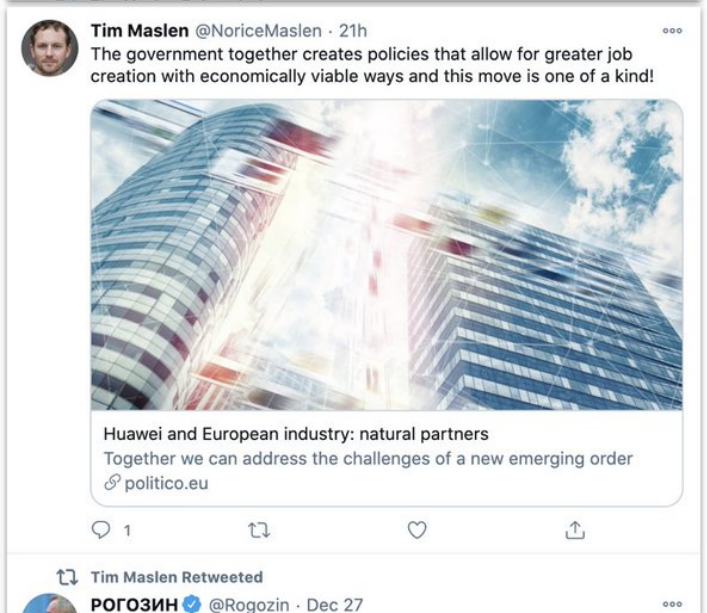
Handy rule-of-thumb way to check for obvious GAN faces on multiple accounts: reduce them all to 35% opacity and superimpose them.

Not infallible, and the GAN will get better fast, but... see how the eyeballs align?



They all retweeted posts on #5G and #telcos. Character building.

Each posted 8-10 authored tweets, each a share of a web article plus a comment (usually in English), about #Belgium, #5G, #Huawei or #ZTE.



A couple of the articles were sponsored by Huawei, and labelled as such.

@satariano has some great insights into this one.

← → ↻ itdaily.be/blogs/infrastructuur/belgische-uitrol-5g-op-kruispunt-van-regelgeving-en-protectionisme/ 📄 ☆

ITdaily.

.business .cloud .communicatie .data

Dit is een ingezonden bijdrage van Edwin Vermulst, partner bij VVGB Advocaten. De opinie werd aangeleverd met ondersteuning van Huawei.

🔄 MASK 🚀 Retweeted

Noémie Honiat @noemie26140606 · Dec 21

Some Belgium operators have already begun #5G B2B developments, mainly for logistics and industrial applications, and most are in the test phase. That is not good news for the economy of the country, as the draft bill does not provide clear support!



Belgische uitrol 5G op kruispunt van regelgeving en protectionism...
Op 22 juni bereikte de Belgische Nationale Veiligheidsraad een overeenstemming over een reeks veiligheidsmaatregelen rond de ...
🔗 itdaily.be

💬 2 🔄 3 ❤️ 9 📤

🔄 MASK 🚀 Retweeted

Gascón @GasconJanez · Dec 21

Where R&D, production usually take place worldwide, production takes place in China in most cases. In this sense, a seller's country of origin or head office is neither a sufficient nor an appropriate criterion to determine interference by a third country.



Belgische uitrol 5G op kruispunt van regelgeving en protectionism...
Op 22 juni bereikte de Belgische Nationale Veiligheidsraad een overeenstemming over een reeks veiligheidsmaatregelen rond de ...
🔗 itdaily.be

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Looks like [@ArbiterOfTweets](#) has something interesting coming out soon, too.

"New and relatively explosive."

Watch this space.

<https://t.co/hlvobt9Z7V>

Binnenkort publiceer ik nog een eigen follow-up analyse met nieuwe, relatief explosieve informatie. Stay tuned en zo.
\\U0001f62c

Hier kan je het vorige stuk herlezen: <https://t.co/DSTzpzCZ1f>

— Arbiter (@ArbiterOfTweets) [January 29, 2021](#)

Other articles appeared independent and ran on multiple (but connected) websites.

When that happened, different fake accounts tweeted the same article from different sources - an attempt to make it harder to spot them all with a URL search?

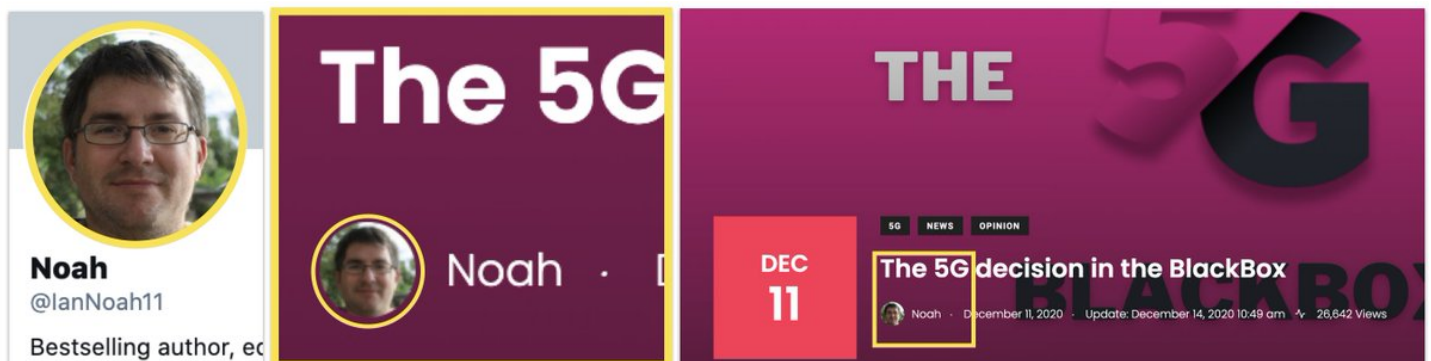
12 assets, one article, 3 URLs.



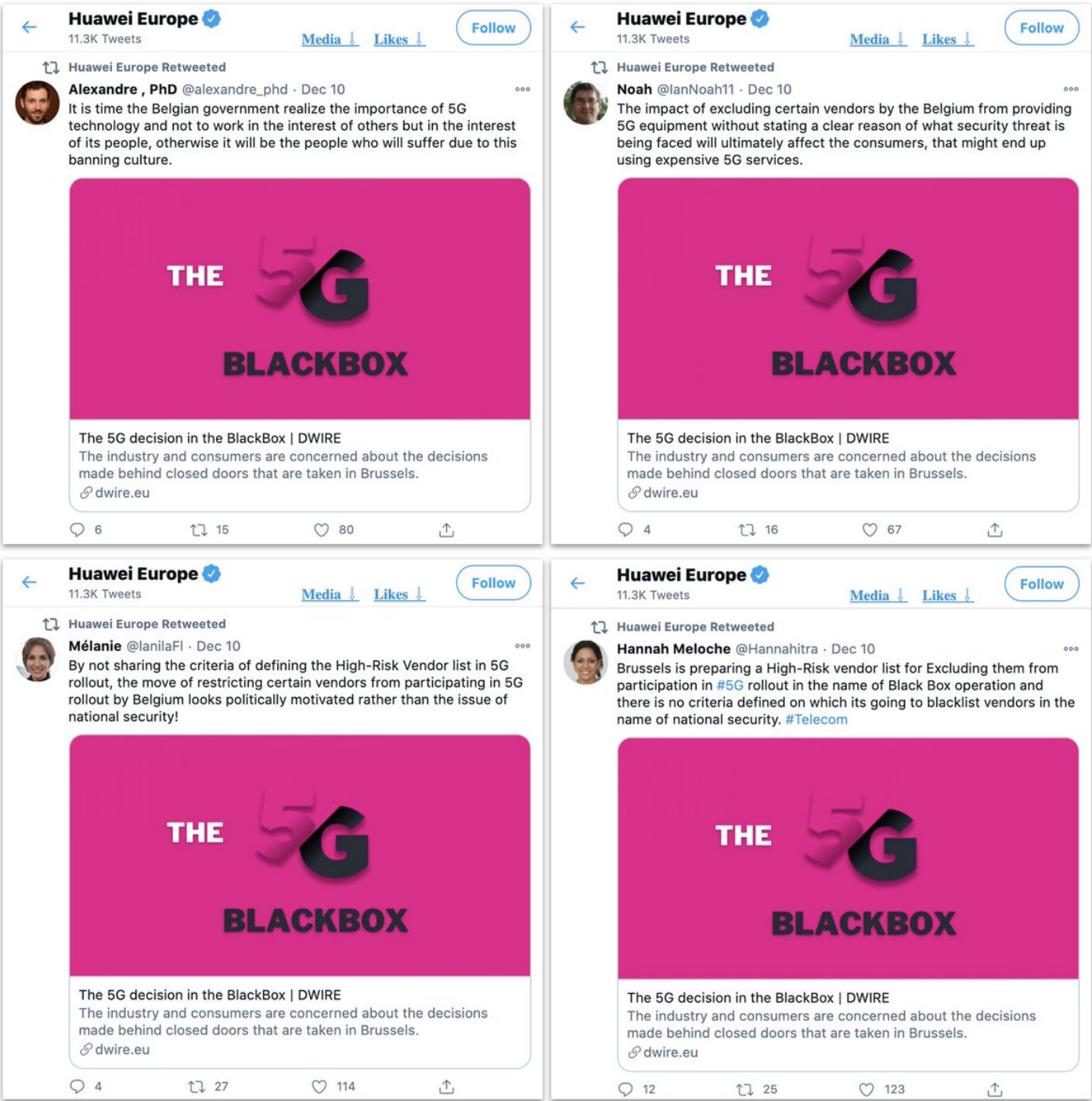
The two most aggressively anti-Belgium articles were different, though.

They were attributed to the fake personas themselves.

Looks like the operation was going for the direct approach.



We don't have enough evidence to prove who was running the campaign. But its most important amplification (in terms of follower numbers and frequency of amplification) came from Huawei staff, including the Huawei Europe verified Twitter account.



For example, here's Huawei Europe retweeting four fake accounts that tweeted the article on Belgium being corrupt.

As far as we can tell, the article was planted on a website by one of the fake accounts.

Huawei Europe ✓
11.3K Tweets Media ↓ Likes ↓ Follow

Huawei Europe Retweeted

Noah @IanNoah11 · Dec 14

Belgium loses 25 percent of its overall public procurement due to corruption; this percentage can significantly increase if the government blocks specific vendors from supplying #5G equipment.



The Corruption: Unpacking Belgium's BlackBox Operation | DWIRE
Transparency is the key to address all such issues. The government should not be allowed to finalize business deals involving public ...
dwire.eu

9 24 86

Huawei Europe ✓
11.3K Tweets Media ↓ Likes ↓ Follow

Huawei Europe Retweeted

Hannah Meloche @Hannahitra · Dec 14

The recent Blackbox operation by the Belgium government to maintain a secret high-risk vendor list is the reason why the public office holders get away with potential corruption charges in the name of national security.



The Corruption: Unpacking Belgium's BlackBox Operation | DWIRE
Transparency is the key to address all such issues. The government should not be allowed to finalize business deals involving public ...
dwire.eu

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Huawei Europe ✓
11.3K Tweets Media ↓ Likes ↓ Follow

Huawei Europe Retweeted

Alexandre , PhD @alexandre_phd · Dec 14

There is still hope to control the corruption in public procurement by adopting a transparent approach in awarding public procurement contracts such as selecting 5G equipment vendors based on merit instead of political gains.



The Corruption: Unpacking Belgium's BlackBox Operation | DWIRE
Transparency is the key to address all such issues. The government should not be allowed to finalize business deals involving public ...
dwire.eu

3 14 44

Huawei Europe ✓
11.3K Tweets Media ↓ Likes ↓ Follow

Huawei Europe Retweeted

Mélanie @lanilaFI · Dec 14

The role of the U.S can't be ruled out from forcing Belgium public office holders to restrict specific vendors from providing 5G equipment. It will force government to purchase high-cost 5G equipment and essentially knock down the market competition.



The Corruption: Unpacking Belgium's BlackBox Operation | DWIRE
Transparency is the key to address all such issues. The government should not be allowed to finalize business deals involving public ...
dwire.eu

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Here are Twitter accounts attributed to Huawei Europe figures, including two verified ones, retweeting the fake accounts, which were tweeting the operation's articles.



And here.



Searching for all mentions of all 14 fake accounts over the past year, and sorting the mentioners by following using [@Meltwater](#), these are the top amplifiers.

Note the number of times each one mentioned one of the fake accounts (red box).

lanilaF OR CiesteNel OR cholegnol OR IanNoah11 OR oceane_loic OR elise_vic OR noemie26140606 OR Hannahitra OR nathalie_vierin OR fynn_leonie OR IdaArise OR GasconJanez OR NoriceMaslen OR alexandre_phd

Huawei Europe
@Huawei_Europe
This is the official Twitter site of Huawei Europe, communicating the cultivation of digital change, affecting people & business. #TECH4ALL

Kevin Liu
@Pacdwu
President of Public Affairs and Communications Department, Western Europe, Huawei Technologies.

Mike BAI
@Mike_IMC
1 of 194,000 Proud Strivers | Telecom Engineer | Strategic Designer | Business Manager | #SG #AI #IoT #DigitalTransformation Influencer | Views are mine

Wells Li 李俊维
@HWRWEU
President of Human Resource, Western Europe, Huawei Technologies.
📍 Germany 🌐 huawei.com/en/voice-of-hu... 📅 Joined February 2020

Na RAN
@Na_IMC
Western European Region, Huawei Technologies
📍 Germany 📅 Joined April 2020

Top Twitter Authors

Author	Tweets	Followers
1 🇺🇸 @huawei_europe	47	5.4M
2 🇺🇸 @pacdwueu	60	1.16M
3 🇺🇸 @mike_imc	63	899k
4 🇺🇸 @hrweu	46	838k
5 🇺🇸 @na_imc	27	688k
6 🇺🇸 @shirley_imc	30	415k
7 🇺🇸 @frank_imc	24	404k
8 🇺🇸 @jasonli_imc	26	324k
9 🇺🇸 @cfoweu	24	288k
10 🇺🇸 @legalweu	4	84.6k

Shirly Wang
@Shirley_IMC
20 Years of connecting Europe.
My OWN Views here.

Frank SHEN
@Frank_IMC
1 of 194,000 Proud Strivers, Western Europe, Huawei Technologies.
#SGRoadshow2020 #20YearsHuaweiEurope #TECH4ALL Views my own.

Jason Lee
@JasonLI_IMC
Western Europe, Huawei Technologies. #20YearsHuaweiEurope #TECH4ALL
📅 Joined April 2020

Ye Xiaowen
@CFOWEU
CFO, Western Europe, Huawei Technologies.
📍 Germany 📅 Joined March 2020

Winson Wang
@LegalWEU
Legal Director - Huawei West Europe Region 华为西地区部 法务部部长
Translate bio

Per @satariano, Huawei is investigating.

Looking forward to the results of that one.

Huawei said in a statement that it had started an internal investigation “to try to find out what exactly has happened and if there has been any inappropriate behavior.”

A couple of things stand out about this campaign.

One was the theme. This looked like an exercise in dark lobbying: try and raise the heat on the Belgian government on an issue that's of interest to a corporate titan.

Business, not party politics.



Mélanie @lanilaFI · Dec 14

...

The role of the U.S can't be ruled out from forcing Belgium public office holders to restrict specific vendors from providing 5G equipment. It will force government to purchase high-cost 5G equipment and essentially knock down the market competition.



**THE
CORRUPTION**

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Transparency is the key to address all such issues. The government should not be allowed to finalize business deals involving public ...

dwire.eu

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That's not unexpected, but it's important.

Most of the influence ops we've tracked so far have been in the political or geopolitical space.

Dark lobbying like this will be something to watch for more.

Second thing, though, is how many people identified this.

We found it via Spamouflage. [@mvanhulten](#) and [@ArbiterOfTweets](#) spotted sponsored posts that led there.

There's a growing community of people who can spot this stuff, explain it and expose it.

That's important too.

Running influence ops may seem like an attractive option, but they're going to have to be a lot less dumb than this one was to avoid getting exposed.

These fake Twitter accounts never had much impact while active.

But their exposure landed them in @nytimes and @knack, and not in a good way.

Was the operation worth the blowback? Let's keep watching to find out.

<https://t.co/u0VOfoa4KN>