

The logo for Graphika, featuring the word "Graphika" in a white, stylized, monospace-style font. The background is dark with a network of glowing orange lines.

IRA Again: Unlucky Thirteen

Facebook Takes Down Small,
Recently Created Network Linked
to Internet Research Agency

Ben Nimmo, Camille François,
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09.2020

Takedowns

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Introduction

On September 1, 2020, Facebook [announced](#) that it had taken down 2 recently created pages and 13 accounts on its platform that it attributed to “individuals associated with past activity by the Russian Internet Research Agency (IRA).” The network largely served to amplify a website called [peacedata\[.\]net](#) that claimed to be an independent news outlet working in English and Arabic. Facebook exposed the network after a tip-off from U.S. law enforcement about off-platform activity.

Before the takedown, Facebook shared the network with Graphika for independent analysis.

The personas that the network created used AI-generated profile pictures and maintained a presence across Facebook, Twitter, and LinkedIn in an apparent attempt to appear more convincing; this is the first time we have observed known IRA-linked accounts use AI-generated avatars. However, the website employed real and apparently unwitting individuals, typically novice freelance writers, to write its articles. Between February and August 2020, it published over 500 articles in English and over 200 articles in Arabic, some of them original, others copied from a range of sources.

The network appeared designed to target progressive and left-wing audiences, including in the United States and United Kingdom. The personas that the network created masqueraded as left-wing journalists and editors. In keeping with that identity, they published and shared articles about the race protests in the United States, accusations of foreign interference and war crimes committed by the U.S., corruption, and the suffering caused by capitalism. They particularly aimed their posts at progressive groups in the U.S. and UK and criticized both right-wing and center-left politicians while endorsing progressive and left-wing policies. In Arabic, some articles also attacked France in general and President Emmanuel Macron in particular, and accused them of an “imperialist” approach toward Africa.

The network was in its infancy when it was taken down: the website began publishing in December 2019, and the Facebook assets were set up in May 2020. Despite their targeted efforts at audience building, they failed to gain significant traction, measured in likes, shares, and comments. Most of the network's English-language posts achieved single-digit engagement figures; in Arabic, most posts achieved similar results, but a handful gathered thousands each in what appears to have been an attempt at false amplification.

The exposure of the network illustrates a number of evolutions in IRA-linked tactics since the last takedowns in [October 2019](#) and [March 2020](#). First, as noted, the use of AI-generated profile pictures is new for this actor (although it is becoming [increasingly prevalent](#) in influence operations elsewhere). The ease with which influence operations can now leverage machine learning to generate fake profile pictures is an ongoing concern. At present, the AI-generated profile pictures used by influence operations have been relatively easy to recognize, and the use of such images does little to mask other behavioral clues.

Second, the employment of real but unwitting authors builds on the recent practice by IRA-linked operations of avoiding writing their own content: in [October 2019](#), they largely copied their content from authentic users, and in [March 2020](#), they employed Ghanaian activists to write posts. This tactic reduces the operation's risk of giving itself away through basic language errors and gives it a screen of authentic writers to hide behind, but it creates a pool of witnesses who may be able to expose more about how the operation worked. Recruitment posts on freelancing platforms for this operation were also reminiscent of the earlier days of the IRA, when [freelance writers](#) and specialists were recruited in a similar fashion (to work in both Russian and English).

Third, it continues a trend of influence operations trying to use a smaller number of more convincing and carefully crafted accounts to target communities and publications. Rather than the thousands of accounts that the original IRA ran to reach for a mass audience in 2014-2017, this operation used just 13 accounts and 2 pages on Facebook, but it maintained its false personas across multiple social media platforms, notably Twitter and LinkedIn, and it engaged directly with a small number of unwitting individuals.

Finally, the operation conducted its targeting with pinpoint precision, if little apparent effect. English-language Facebook assets run by the operation itself (rather than its co-opted writers) focused very heavily on a small number of political groups, including Democratic Socialists, environmentalists, and disgruntled Democrats in the United States. This shows a consistent focus on a core constituency: left-leaning voters in the United States and United Kingdom who may be dissuaded from supporting the more centrist leadership of the Democratic and Labour parties. Relatively few posts – around 5 percent of the English-language articles on the website – dealt primarily with the U.S. election or candidates, and many articles had no direct relation to U.S. domestic politics, but this facet of the operation suggests an attempt to build a left-wing audience and steer it away from Biden's campaign, in the same way that the original IRA tried to [depress progressive and minority support for Hillary Clinton](#) in 2016.

Unlucky Thirteen: The Takedown Set

This is the smallest IRA-linked effort that has yet been exposed: Facebook discovered 13 accounts and 2 pages on its platform, and Graphika found roughly the same number of assets on Twitter and LinkedIn. Many of the latter were taken down in early August, but they left enough traces in online caches and archives to glean some insight into their activity.

As it [announced](#) the takedown on September 1, Facebook said, “The people behind this activity relied on fake accounts — some of which had already been detected and disabled by our automated systems — to create elaborate fictitious personas, manage Pages, post in Groups and drive people to their off-platform site masquerading as an independent news outlet based primarily in Romania . . . We began this investigation based on information about this network’s off-platform activity from the FBI. Our internal investigation revealed the full scope of this network on Facebook. Although the people behind this activity attempted to conceal their identity and coordination, our investigation found links to individuals associated with past activity by the Russian Internet Research Agency (IRA).”

The operation was centered on a website, [peacedata\[.\]net](#). Its Facebook pages were titled [@peacedata.net](#) (in Arabic) and [@peacedataofficial](#) (in English), and they primarily shared articles from the website. They claimed to be “a global news organization. Our goal is to shed light on the global issues and raise awareness . . . We cover stories that are usually untold or kept hidden from the general public.” This is similar to the mission statements of Kremlin outlets RT (“get stories the mainstream media won’t tell you”) and Sputnik (“telling the untold”).

The PeaceData domain was registered on February 6, 2020. However, it carried English-language content that was uploaded as early as December 11, 2019, according to the page source information. Some of these early posts were translations credited to “Peace Monitor.” There is a separate domain, [peacemonitor\[.\]com](#), that was created on December 10, 2019: it now redirects to [peacedata\[.\]net](#). It is likely that the articles now on the PeaceData site that were uploaded in December through February were originally posted to [peacemonitor\[.\]com](#) and then transferred to the new domain in February. On December 25, 2019, the Twitter account [@peacedata](#) was created.

The Facebook activity started later: the Arabic page was created on May 15, the English page on May 20. According to Facebook’s page transparency settings, the Arabic page was managed from Romania and Tunisia. The English page had too few followers to reach the transparency threshold.

About See All

Visit Website
<http://www.peacedata.net/>

i Peace Data is a global news organization. Our goal is to shed light on the global issues and raise awareness

👍 197 people like this

👤 201 people follow this

✉ [Send Message](#)

✉ [@peacedata.net](#)

📰 [News & Media Website](#)

i Peace Data is a global news organization. We cover stories that are usually untold or kept hidden from the general public. Contact us:
[About Us: https://peacedata.net/about-us/](#)

Page Transparency ✕

Page Information for Peacedata عربي **i**

Peacedata عربي
 Website

Page History **i**

- 🔄** Changed name to Peacedata عربي
May 29, 2020
- 🚩** Page created - Peacedata
May 15, 2020

People Who Manage This Page **i**

📍 Primary country/region location for people who manage this Page includes:
 Romania (1)
 Tunisia (1)

Ads From This Page

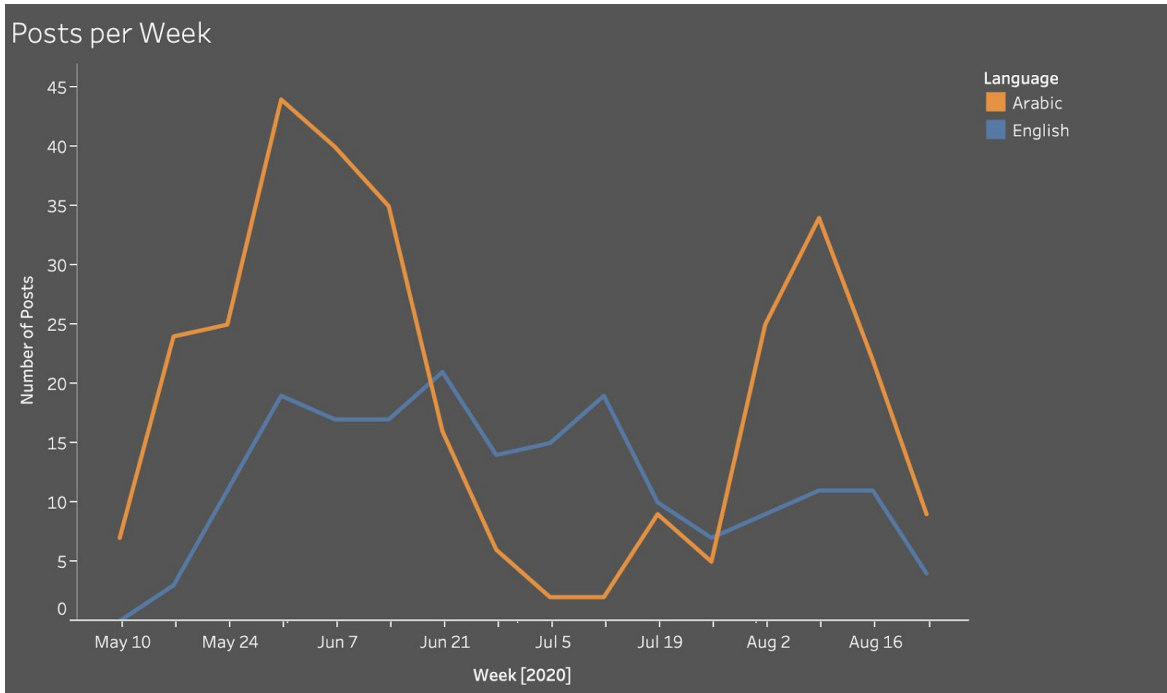
📄 This Page is not currently running ads.

! Find support or report Page

[Close](#)

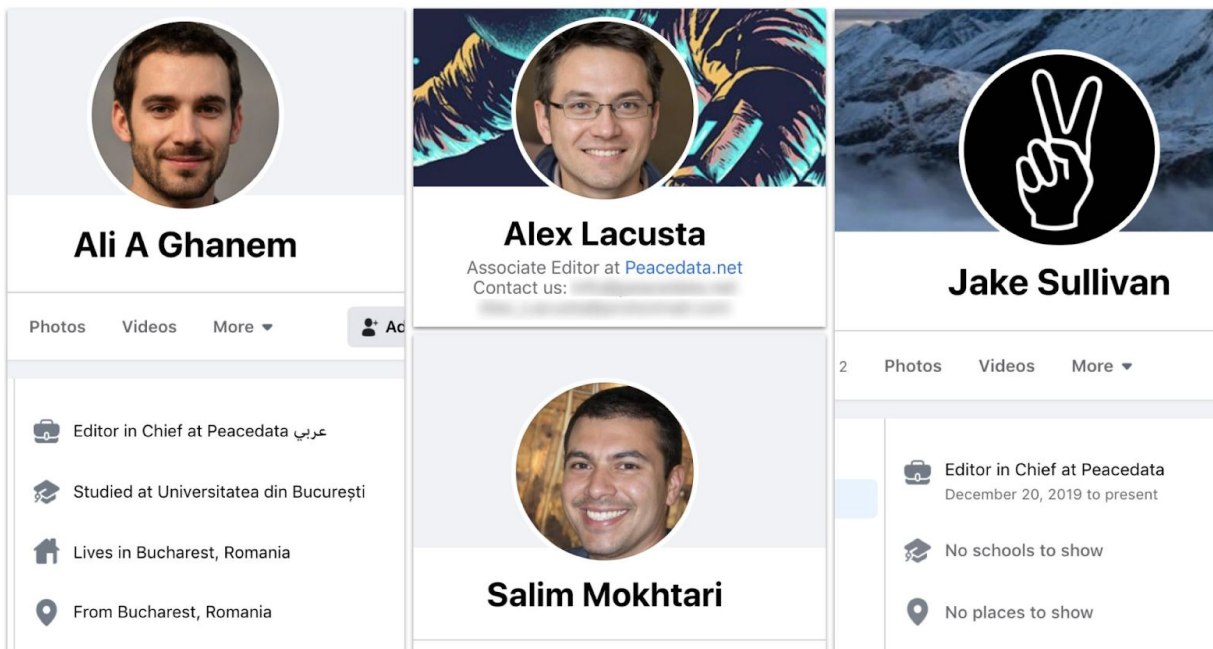
Left, page information for the English-language page. Right, transparency details for the Arabic-language page, showing the manager locations.

The pages were moderately active, typically making between one and five posts per day. The Arabic-language page was most active in late May and early June, running at a rate of up to 45 posts per week; it dipped sharply through June and mid-July before picking up again in mid-August. The English-language page never scaled those giddy heights but ran more consistently at a rate of around 18-20 posts per week from early June to mid-July before dropping back to around 10 posts per week thereafter.



Weekly rate of posting by the Arabic (orange) and English (blue) pages, May through August, 2020.

Around these two pages, the operation built a cluster of fake personas which it identified as PeaceData staff. On Facebook, these fake personas included two editors-in-chief, in Arabic (Ali Ahmed Ghanem) and English (Jake Sullivan), an associate editor in English (Alex Lacusta), and an Arabic-language freelance journalist (Salim Mokhtari).



Account profiles for Ali A Ghanem, Alex Lacusta, Jake Sullivan, and Salim Mokhtari.

Three of these accounts showed young men in their profile pictures; the fourth, Jake Sullivan, did not, but the [PeaceData website did](#). It identified him as an “American living in the Czech Republic.” The website named a further colleague, communications manager [Alice Schultz](#), and a Google search for “PeaceData” revealed a cached Twitter account, suspended some time after June 8, in the name of [Albert Popescu](#), another associate editor.¹ These showed a young blonde woman and a slightly older man as their profile pictures. The Alex Lacusta persona was also on Twitter.

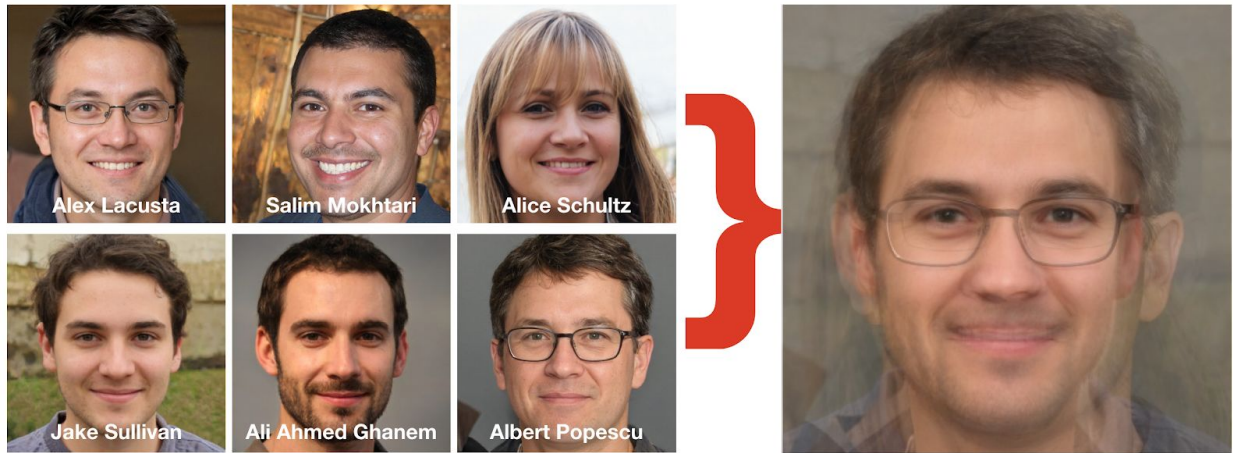


Cached Twitter accounts of [Albert Popescu](#) and [Alice Schultz](#) showing the PeaceData affiliation. Note also the locations they claimed.

Graphika analyzed these profile pictures and concluded with high confidence that all six were created by the form of artificial intelligence known as Generative Adversarial Networks (GAN). GAN-generated images can often be identified by errors in the symmetry of features, such as

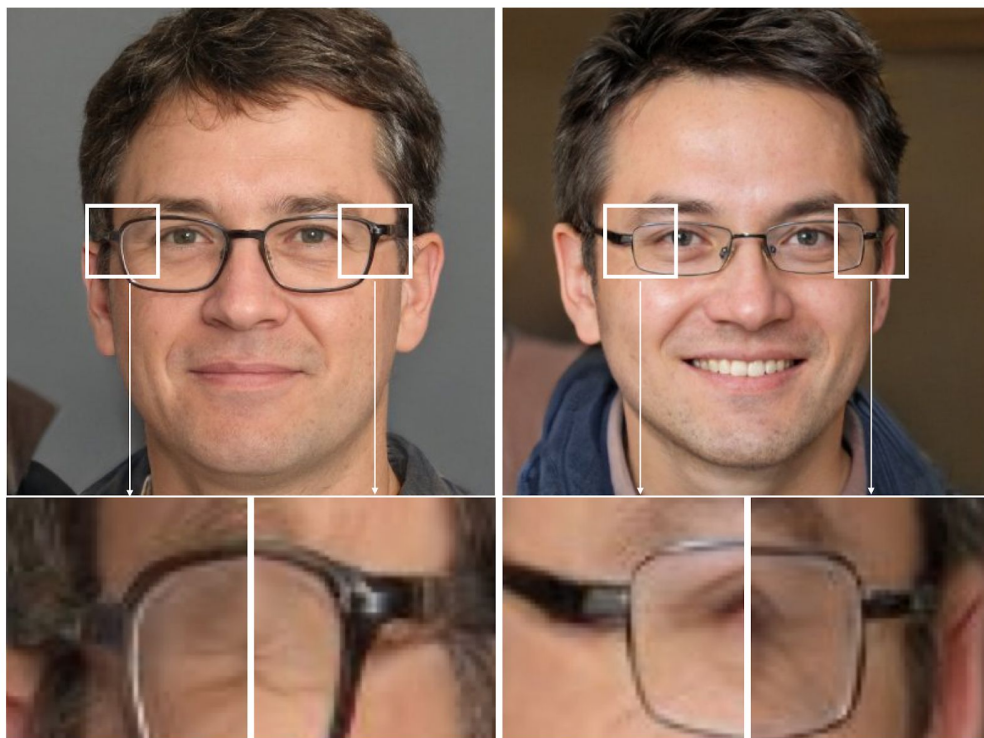
¹ It is curious that four of six of these fake personas had names beginning with AI-: Alice Schultz, Ali Ahmed Ghanem, Albert Popescu, and Alex Lacusta. The reason for this patterning is unclear.

ears, earrings, and glasses; by vague and distorted backgrounds; and by superimposing a number of faces on one another and then rendering them opaque.



Left, screenshots of six of the network's fake personas: Alex Lacusta, Salim Mokhtari, Alice Schultz, Jake Sullivan, Ali Ahmed Ghanem, and Albert Popescu. Right, all six superimposed and reduced to 35% opacity to show the alignment of the eyes.

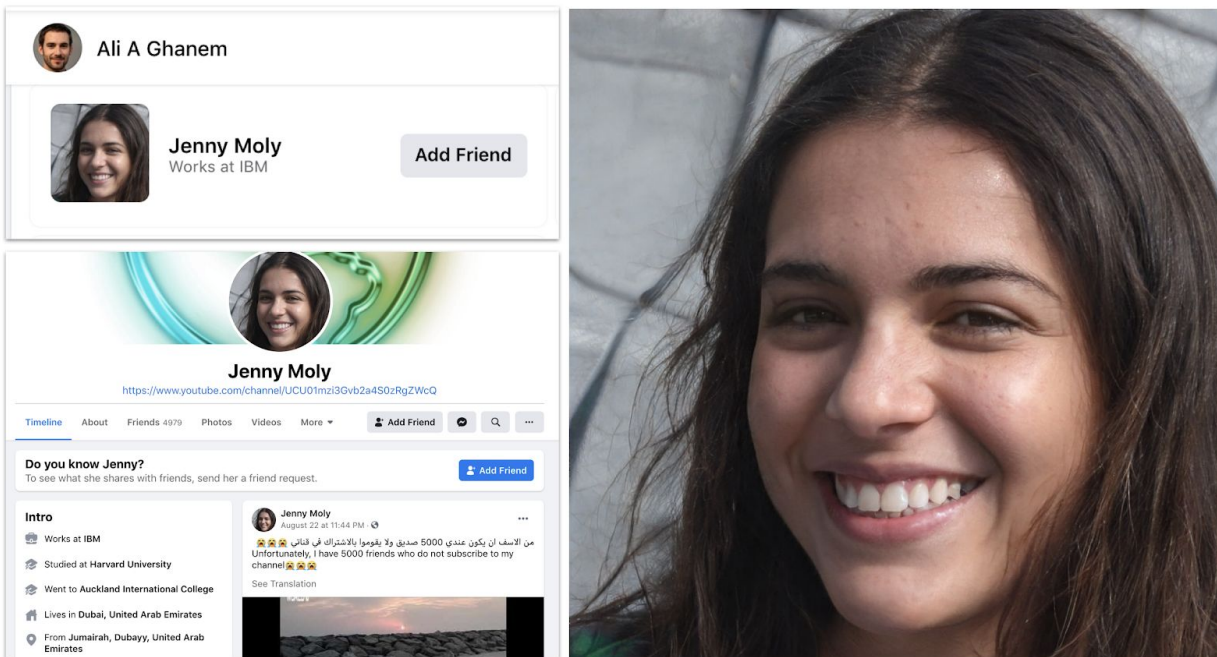
Both Albert Popescu and Alex Lacusta were depicted as wearing glasses; these showed asymmetries that are typical of early generations of GAN-created images.



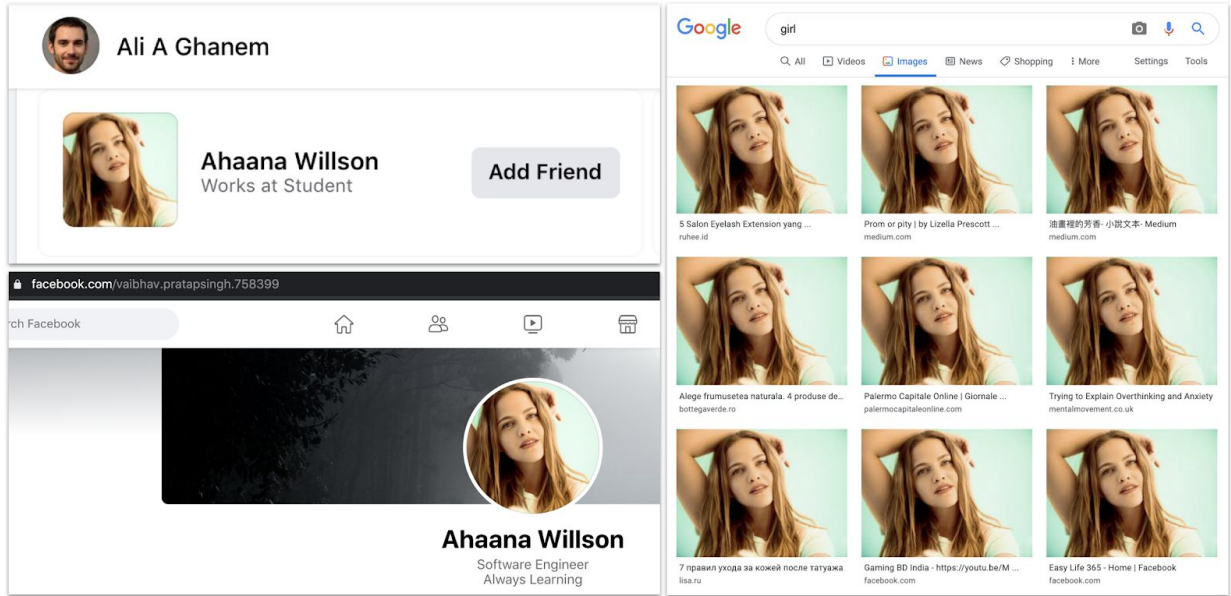
Profile pictures for Albert Popescu (left) and Alex Lacusta (right), with close-ups of the frames of their glasses, showing the asymmetry where the arms connect to the frame.

The PeaceData personas had some Facebook friends, but not many. Ali Ahmed Ghanem listed 372 and Salim Mokhtari listed 117; Jake Sullivan had two, one of whom was Alex Lacusta.

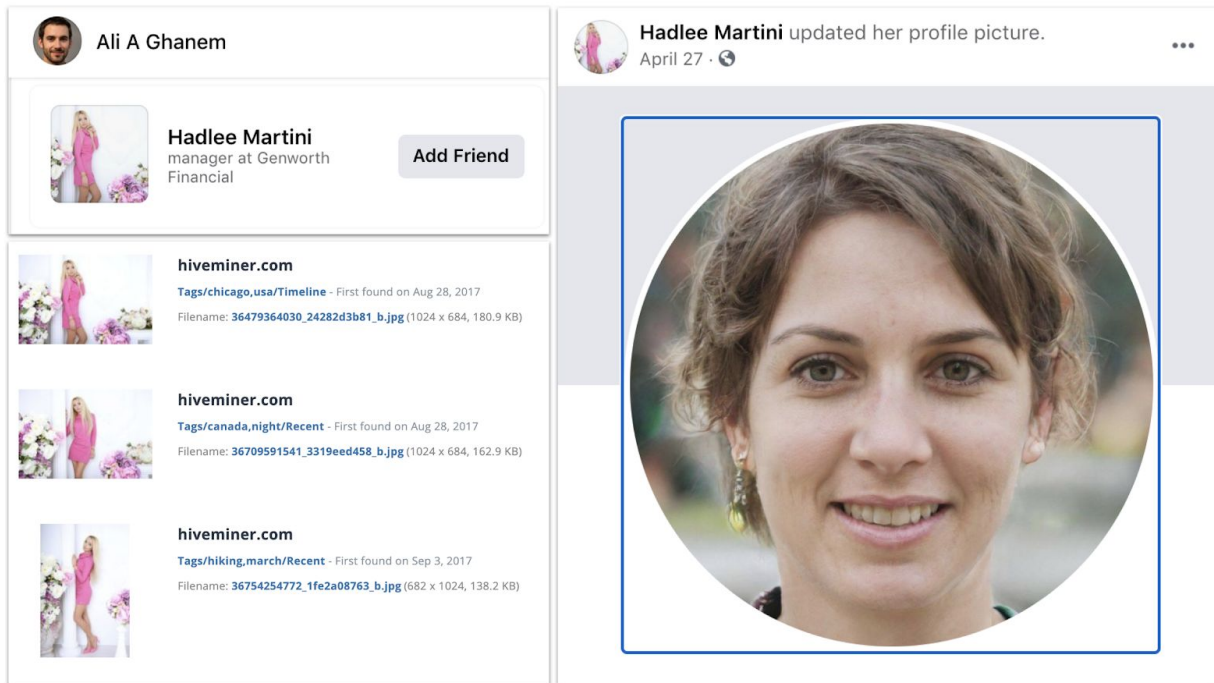
There are indications that at least some of these “friends” were inauthentic and were acquired to give the IRA-linked accounts an aura of legitimacy. For example, Ali Ghanem’s friends included a woman called Jenny Moly, whose profile picture also appeared to be GAN-generated; a woman called Ahaana Wilson, whose URL was in the name of Vaibhav Pratapsingh and whose profile picture was borrowed from an online library of stock photography; and a woman called Hadlee Martini, whose latest profile picture was also a stock shot and whose original photo appeared to be GAN generated. These accounts did not engage with PeaceData assets or content in any other way: they are likely to have been acquired as friends for purely cosmetic purposes.



Ali A Ghanem and his friend [Jenny Moly](#); judging by the alignment of the eyes and the background, this photo, too, is GAN generated. The account primarily posted links to a [YouTube channel](#) apparently run from the United Arab Emirates that offered “emotional comfort and relaxation.”



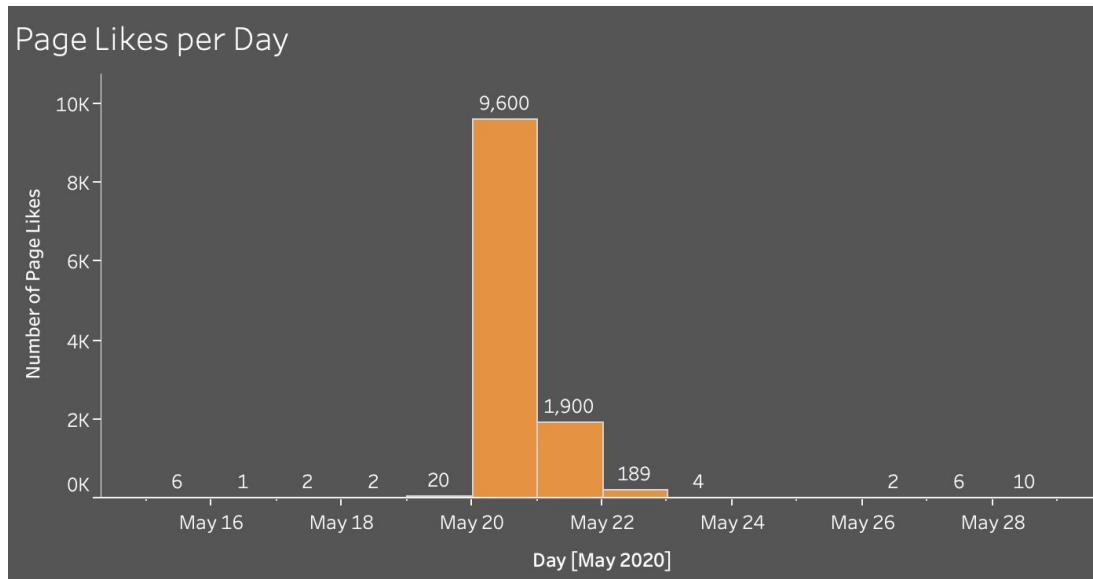
Ali A Ghanem and his friend [Ahaana Willson](#), whose account's URL was in the name of Vaibhav Pratapsingh and whose profile picture was taken from a model posing for stock photography.



Ali A Ghanem and his friend [Hadlee Martini](#). The account's latest profile picture was taken from a model posing for stock photography (revealed by TinEye); an earlier profile picture appears to have been GAN generated.

Overall, these assets did not build a significant audience or gain substantial impact. The two Facebook pages received sharply different engagement: as of August 27, the Arabic page had received 14,000 likes but the English page had only 198. Many of its likes were concentrated in

short bursts of intense activity: for example, in the first five days of its existence, the Arabic page received 31 likes across 19 posts. One of these posts, on May 19, was a report on a Franco-Algerian discussion on energy exports; it was liked eight times. On May 20, the same post, with almost the same text, received over 9,600 likes.



Likes per day for the first two weeks of activity on the Arabic-language Peacedata page, showing the surge on May 20, with the minimal engagement before and after.



Posts by the Arabic Peacedata page on May 19 and 20, the fifth and sixth days of its existence, showing the number of likes in each case.

The total Facebook following of these combined assets was just over 14,000, almost all of them followers of the Arabic-language page. This is one-twentieth of the following that just one IRA account in 2016, “Black Matters U.S.,” managed to build up. In terms of English-speaking users, the follower count was in the low hundreds. This was an operation in the early stages of audience building, taken down while it was still finding its feet.

Content and Messaging

One of the noteworthy features of the PeaceData operation was that it relied almost entirely on content that was produced by external writers or publications: it either copied its articles from other websites or engaged freelancers to write for it. Although the writing came from others, the selection of content and the editorial process were controlled by the operation itself. As such, the articles that the website published and the social media accounts promoted are worth analyzing for what they reveal about the operation’s preoccupations and intentions, even when the content itself was drafted by outsiders.

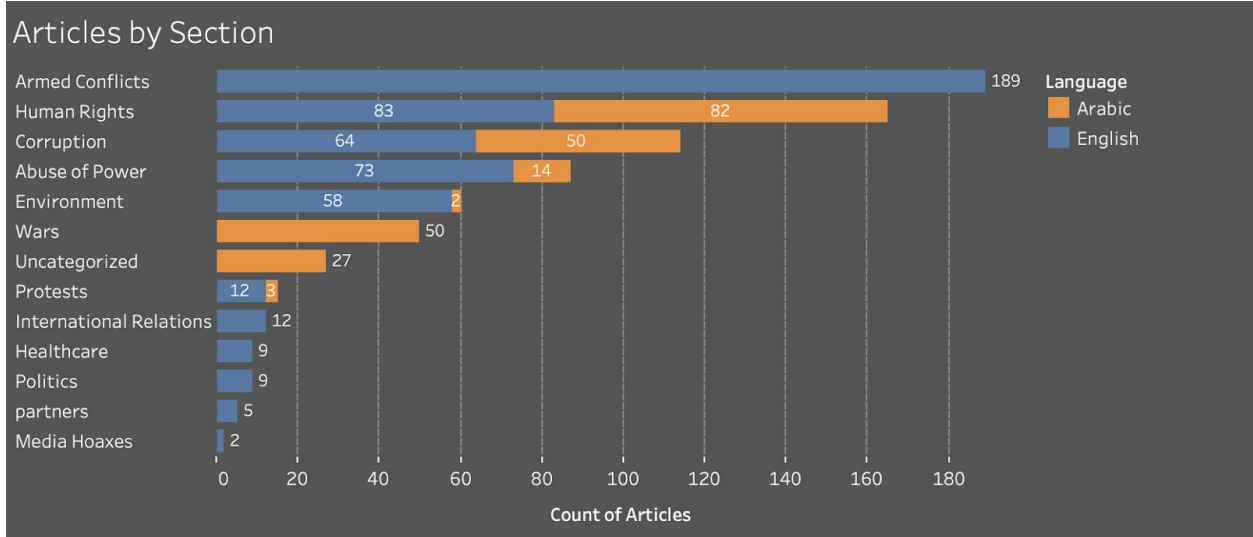
The PeaceData website, and the social media accounts, concentrated on a number of intersecting themes. As the “About Us” section on the website said, “We are focused on armed conflicts, corruption, environment crisis, abuse of power, activism, and human rights. We seek the truth about key world events, facts and problems hidden from the general public.” Overall, and consistently across these themes, it took a left-wing stance, opposing what it portrayed as Western imperialism and the excesses of capitalism.



Headline from PeaceData on [June 17](#).

Both the English- and Arabic-language sections of the site divided their articles by theme, allowing us to represent the operation’s main topics of interest as it perceived them.

In Arabic, these were, in descending order, human rights and their abuse, especially by Western countries; wars, especially in the Middle East; and corruption around the world. In English, where the website offered more themes, the favorites were armed conflicts, especially in the Middle East; human rights, especially their abuse by the United States and United Kingdom; abuses of power by Western and Middle Eastern leaders; corruption; and the environment.

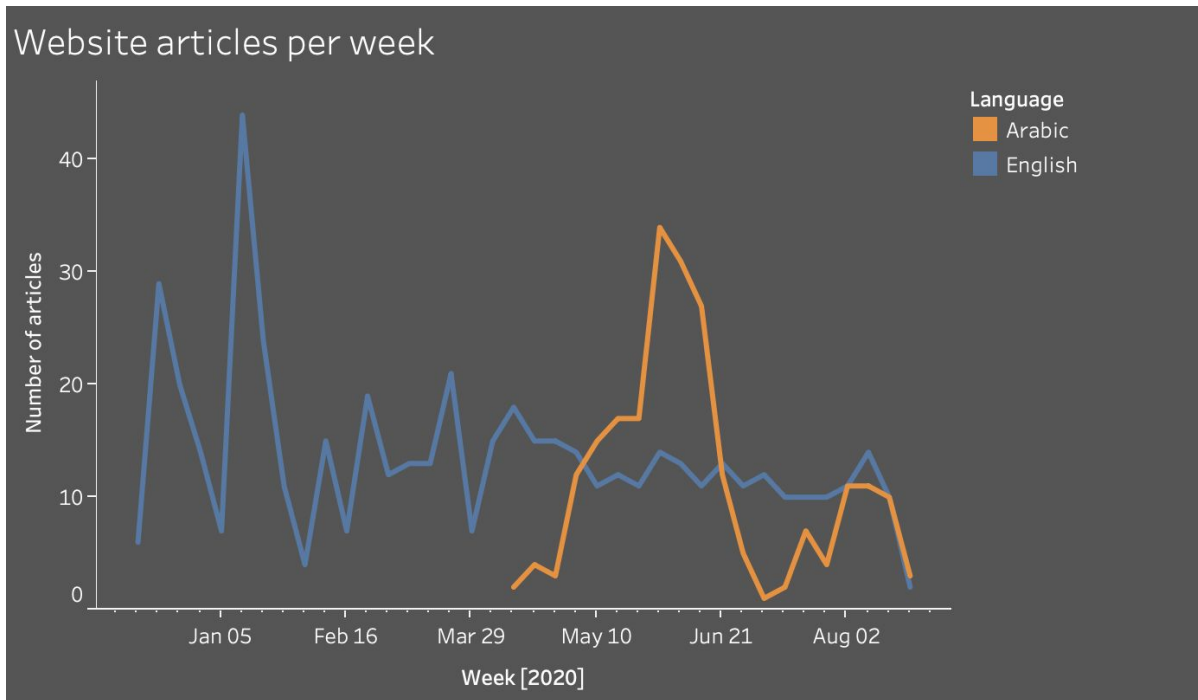


Breakdown of the PeaceData English- and Arabic-language output by theme, as categorized by the site itself.

The English-language section began publishing content in December, but this consisted of excerpts from other online sources, typically with the attribution given. This was more than automated copying; some attempt appears to have been made to curate and edit these sources, not always with great success.² The site started posting original English-language articles in mid-March; by August, it was mainly producing original content.

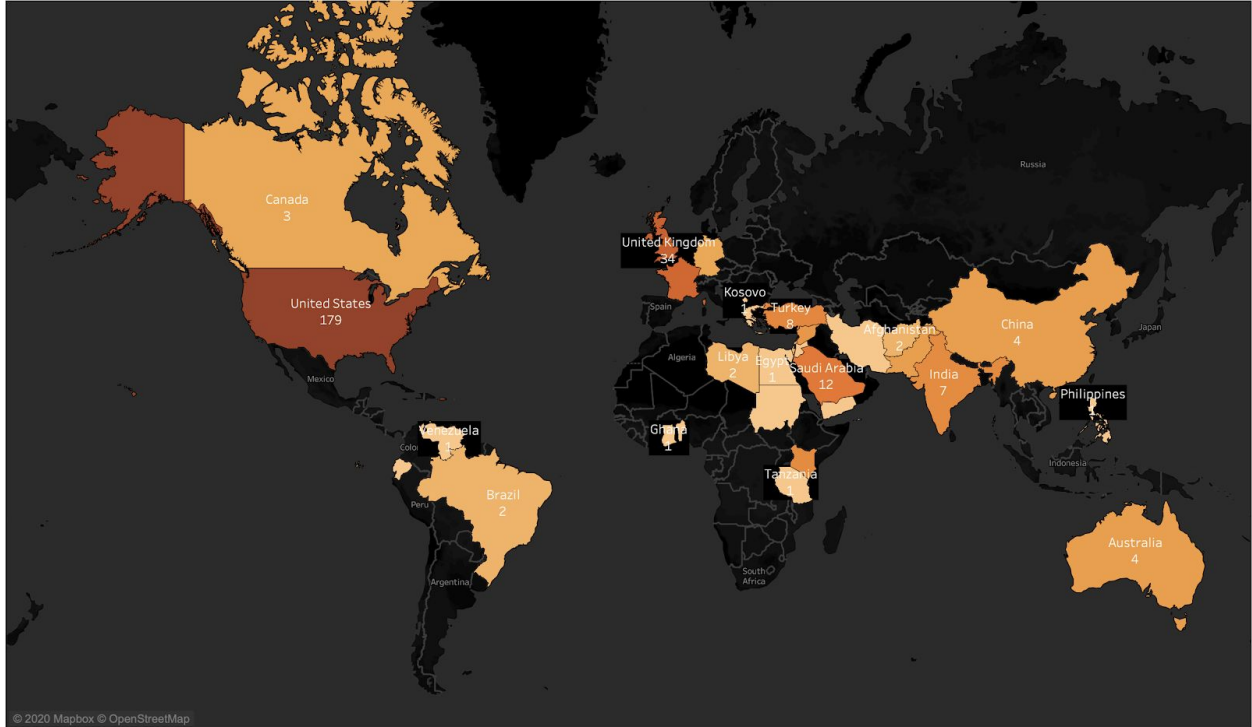
The Arabic site, by contrast, only started posting articles of any kind in April, but it accelerated relatively quickly to generate a high volume of posts by June, dropped back sharply in July, and picked up again in August, mirroring the Facebook page’s behavior.

² For example, an article on [Counterpunch](#) that was originally headlined “Greenhouse Gas Emissions and the Right to Dump Sewage on Your Lawn” became, on the [PeaceData](#) site, “Calls to reduce [sic] GHG emissions are not anti-free market.”



Articles per week on the PeaceData website; note the early start of English content.

The network wrote about a wide range of countries. In English, the United States was by far the most mentioned, with content divided between analysis of its domestic politics (primarily racial tensions, capitalism and inequality, and corruption, with some mention of COVID-19 and a small number of posts about the election) and analysis of its foreign policy (typically portrayed as aggressive, illegal, or unreliable). Beyond that, the operation ranged widely over Europe and the Middle East, with a volume of content also covering Africa and the Pacific.

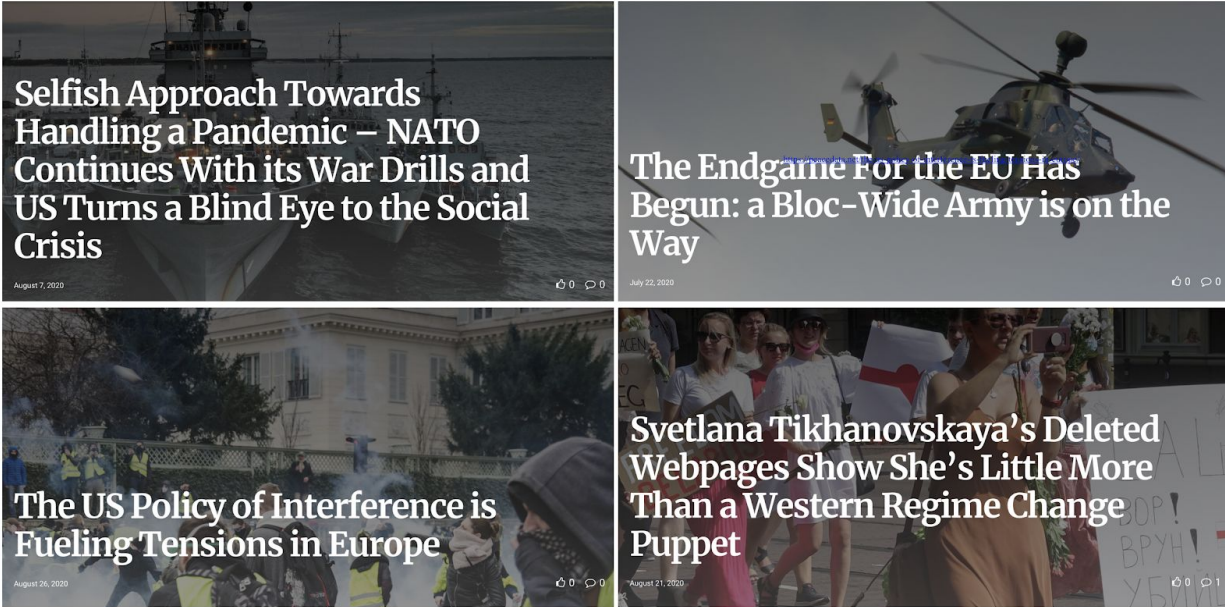


English-language articles by their mention of different countries. Some articles focused on multiple countries, e.g., U.S. relations with China. Only a small minority of the articles that mentioned the United States directly concerned the election, candidates, or campaigns.

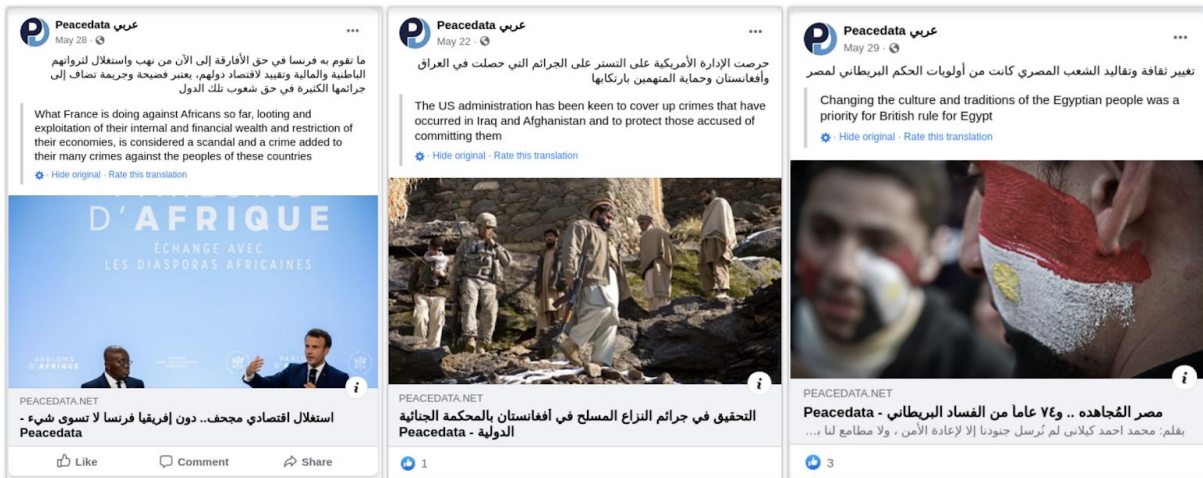
Geopolitics

Many of the articles on the website, both commissioned and copied from other outlets, dealt with geopolitical issues, especially international conflict. The majority were marked by an anti-Western tone and accused Western countries, the EU, or NATO of imperialism or interference in other states, but a significant number selected other targets. These included French President Emmanuel Macron, Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan, and political and business elites in Kenya; a substantial number of articles also focused on the Saudi-led military campaign in Yemen, the suffering of the Palestinians, and the rule of law in India, including the conflict in Kashmir.

Some of these articles, such as the attacks on Erdogan and on Belarusian opposition leader [Svetlana Tikhanovskaya](#), reflected earlier known Russian information operations, which have repeatedly targeted [Turkey](#) and [anti-authoritarian leaders](#) around Russia’s borders.

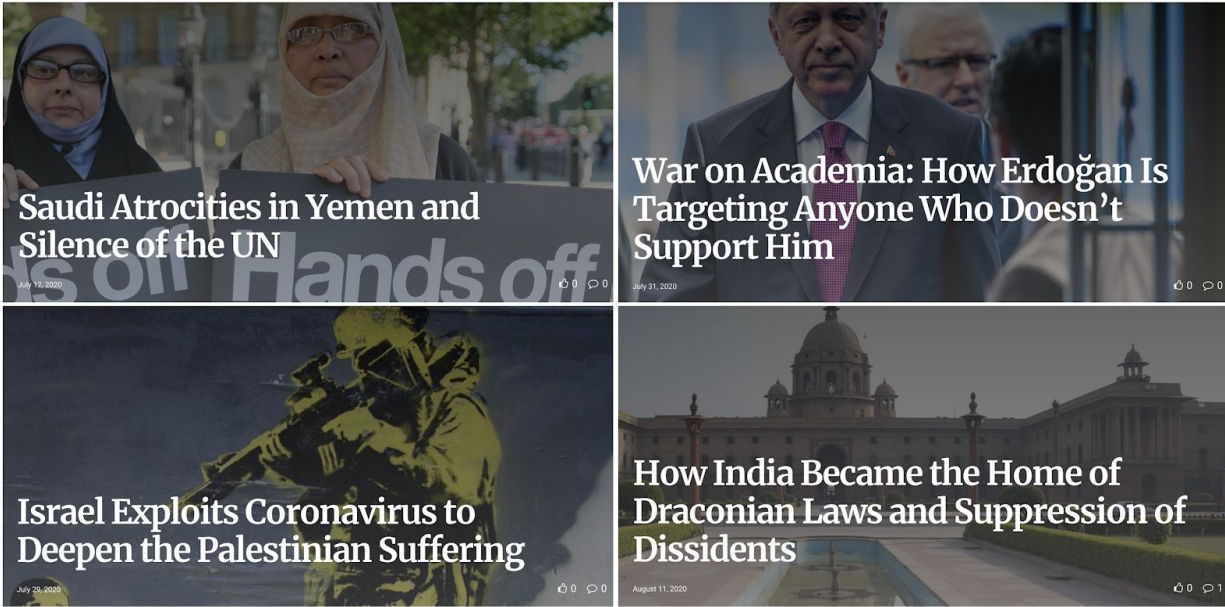


Sample English-language headlines on [NATO](#), the [EU](#), U.S. interference in [Europe](#), and the opposition in [Belarus](#).

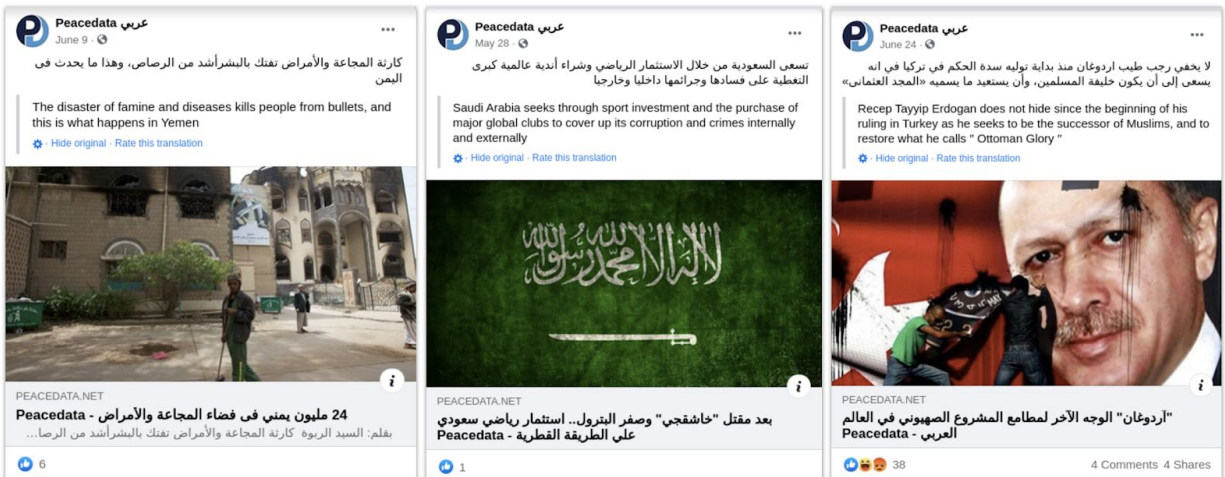


Sample Arabic-language Facebook posts on Western imperialism.

Others focused on political and geopolitical events in the Middle East and South Asia. These broadly criticized Israel, Saudi Arabia, and Turkey, and some posts also concerned developments in India. Other articles focused on Latin America, especially in the context of alleged U.S. “imperialism.”



Sample headlines on [Yemen](#), [Erdoğan](#), the [Palestinians](#), and [India](#).



Posts by the Arabic-language Facebook page on Yemen, Saudi Arabia, and Turkey.

Not all the operation's posts focused solely on government activity. One tweet in April, for example, accused the human-rights NGO Human Rights Watch of being "regime change-hungry" and "pushing to escalate Washington's economic war on Venezuela."



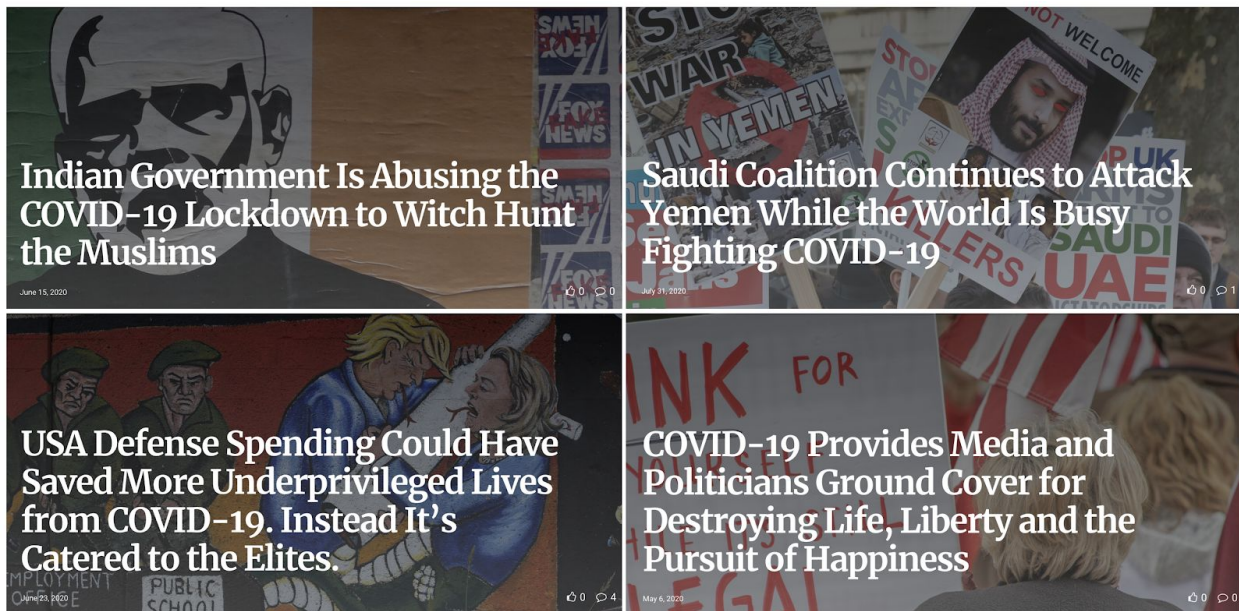
Peace Data @peacedata_

Apr 8 • 11:30 AM

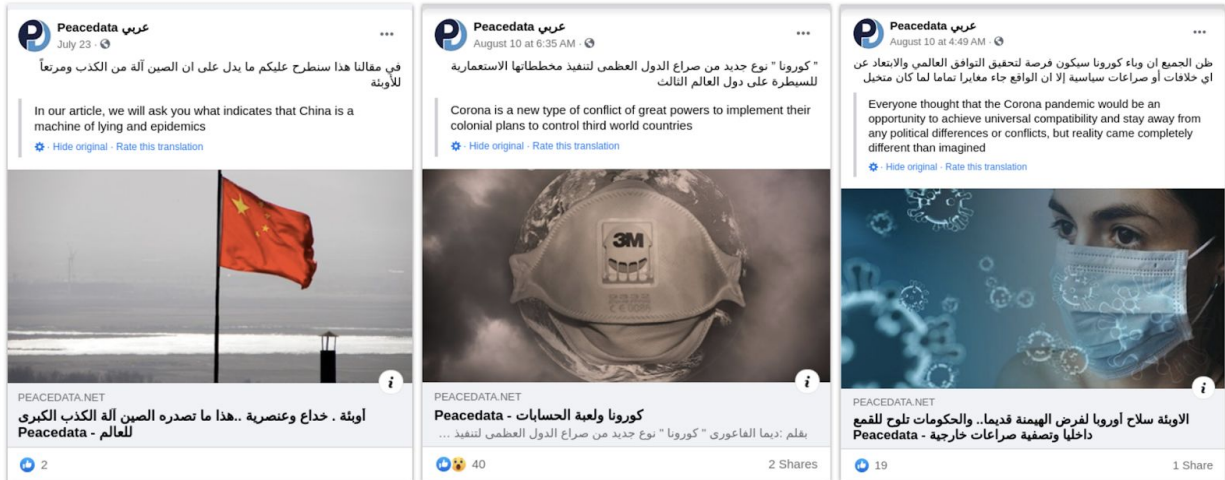
Regime change-hungry HRW is proudly taking credit for crushing new US sanctions on Nicaragua while pushing to escalate Washington's economic war on Venezuela
t.co/WfFolhE6aP

Tweet by @peacedata_ on April 8, concerning Human Rights Watch.

The website also published articles on climate and health issues, especially the COVID-19 pandemic. COVID-19 coverage did not focus on the spread of the pandemic itself as much as the response from Western countries (categorized as ineffective) and allegations that various governments were abusing the pandemic response to further their own ends.



COVID-19 headlines on [India](#), [Saudi Arabia and Yemen](#), the [USA](#), and the [elites](#).



COVID-19 content from the Arabic Facebook page.

United States

Beyond these thematic issues, the operation focused on specific issues in a short list of countries, most notably the United States. Here, the website's portrayal was wholly negative: it presented the U.S. as war-mongering and law-breaking abroad while being wracked by racism, COVID-19, and cutthroat capitalism at home. Headlines that were published in August included:

- [How US Sanctions Worsen the Syrian Humanitarian Crisis](#)
- [Evictions and Foreclosures – The Inevitable Looming Disaster](#)
- [US Continues Airstrikes in Somalia, Killing More Civilians](#)
- [US Armed Forces: A Serious Threat to the Environment](#)
- [The U.S. Seizure of Iranian Oil Tankers: Sanctions or Piracy?](#)
- [Mount Rushmore Is No Longer a Symbol of Freedom](#)
- [Era of US Domination of Latin America Coming to an End](#)

The site paid particular attention to racial and political tensions. This included substantial coverage of the protests that followed the murder of George Floyd and criticism of both President Donald Trump and his challengers, former Vice President Joe Biden and Senator Kamala Harris.



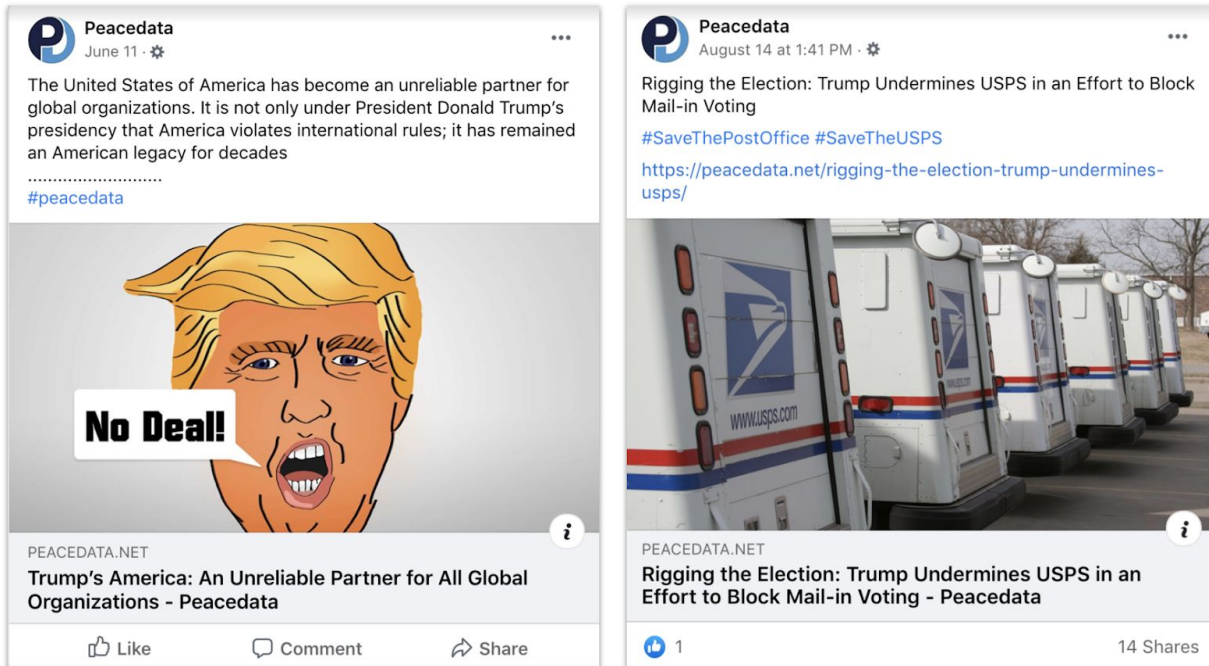
Arabic-language Facebook posts on racism and race protests in the United States.

The English-language content on Biden and Harris was noteworthy for its hostile tone. One [article](#) by a guest writer accused the pair of “submission to right-wing populism [...] as much about preserving careers as it is winning votes.” Another [accused](#) Harris and other Democrats of “deliberately avoid[ing] being held accountable by setting no moral standard for the public to hold them to.” A third [article](#), ostensibly about alleged crimes in the Balkans, argued in its very first paragraph that Biden was an example of “toxic relationships between morally depraved governments and the most heinous of people,” while a fourth [accused](#) him of “apparent prejudice against the Palestinians . . . [and] general racism.”



Posts on Biden and Harris in [July](#) and [August](#). The earlier article was focused on the Balkans, but its first paragraph referenced Biden as an example of “toxic relationships between morally depraved governments and the most heinous of people.”

In line with the network's assumption of a left-leaning persona, the content on Trump was also hostile. Articles that PeaceData appears to have commissioned from genuine English-speaking writers portrayed Trump as [unreliable](#), [meddling](#) in the International Criminal Court, [rigging](#) the 2020 election, and "[unstable and unhinged](#)."



PeaceData posts on Trump in [June](#) (left) and [August](#) (right). Note the low number of reactions to either article.

More broadly, PeaceData's articles, whether commissioned from independent writers or copied from other outlets, took a strongly progressive, left-wing, or even [revolutionary](#) approach to politics. For example, they opposed [Big Oil](#), attacked [Fox News](#) ("the propaganda arm of the GOP") and Amazon billionaire [Jeff Bezos](#) ("Congress is scared. All businesses are scared. And you should be scared too"), condemned [corporate industries](#) ("a menace to the environment"), attacked the [QAnon conspiracy](#) and the [Boogaloo movement](#), and wrote on [systemic racism](#) in the United States. A few articles attacked both Biden and Trump at once.



Trump vs Biden: Lose/Lose For Palestine

June 18, 2020

1 0

Headline on Palestine dated June 18. The [article](#) called Trump “bumbling” and accused Biden of racism.

There is no indication that the freelancers who wrote the articles were anything but sincere in their writing. However, in the context of an operation run by fake personas from Russia, the decision to espouse progressive positions and attack both center-left and right-wing politicians indicates an attempt to woo more left-wing audiences for future influence operations. This is consistent with the operation’s targeting of progressive Facebook groups, discussed below; it is also consistent with the original IRA’s attempt to depress support for then-Democratic candidate Hillary Clinton by [infiltrating and influencing](#) progressive audiences.

United Kingdom

The operation’s stance on the United Kingdom was very similar; indeed, some PeaceData articles bracketed the U.S. and UK together to discuss such issues as housing and poverty. The UK-facing content attacked Britain’s record of foreign engagement, criticized the ruling Conservative (“Tory”) party, accused the UK of war crimes and interference, and mocked it for its stance on Russia. Headlines included:

- [The ‘Russia Report’ Shows the UK Government Hates it When Someone Else Corrupts Democracy Better than it Does](#)
- [UK increases defence spending amid coronavirus pandemic](#)
- [How \[senior Conservative MP\] Jacob Rees-Mogg is making millions from exploiting coronavirus](#)
- [How Tory austerity and welfare reform have worsened UK current economic crisis](#)
- [Challenges Pakistani Immigrants Face In The United Kingdom](#)
- [Criminal landlords exploit housing crisis to demand sky-high rents for illegal slums](#)
- [British Empire colonial practices](#)
- [War crimes: Britain guilty but never questioned](#)

The website’s articles were hostile to the current leader of the Labour party, Sir Keir Starmer, whom they portrayed as [“more centrist than left”](#) and accused of showing a [“disregard for human rights”](#) and [“weaponizing” anti-Semitism](#) “to achieve his own political ends.”



Headlines on the PeaceData website about Starmer [in May](#), before the Facebook page began posting .

At the same time, they offered scathing criticism of the incumbent Conservative party, described as having a “[special flair](#)” for corruption, and of Prime Minister Boris Johnson, described (alongside Trump) as a “[far-right, plutocratic, racist spiv](#).” As with the U.S.-centric content, this editorial stance suggests a desire to appeal to left-wing audiences.



Headlines on the Conservative party in [March](#) and [May](#).

Wikileaks and Whistleblowers

One theme that the website covered repeatedly, though not at a high volume, was the fate of Wikileaks founder Julian Assange and two American whistleblowers, Chelsea Manning and Edward Snowden. Most of the articles were copied from other websites. Headlines on this issue included:

- [Julian Assange and Chelsea Manning's Crucifixion by US Hardliners](#) (copied from globalresearch[.]ca, an outlet often noted for its conspiratorial content)
- [Julian Assange and the Erosion of the Right to a Fair Trial](#)

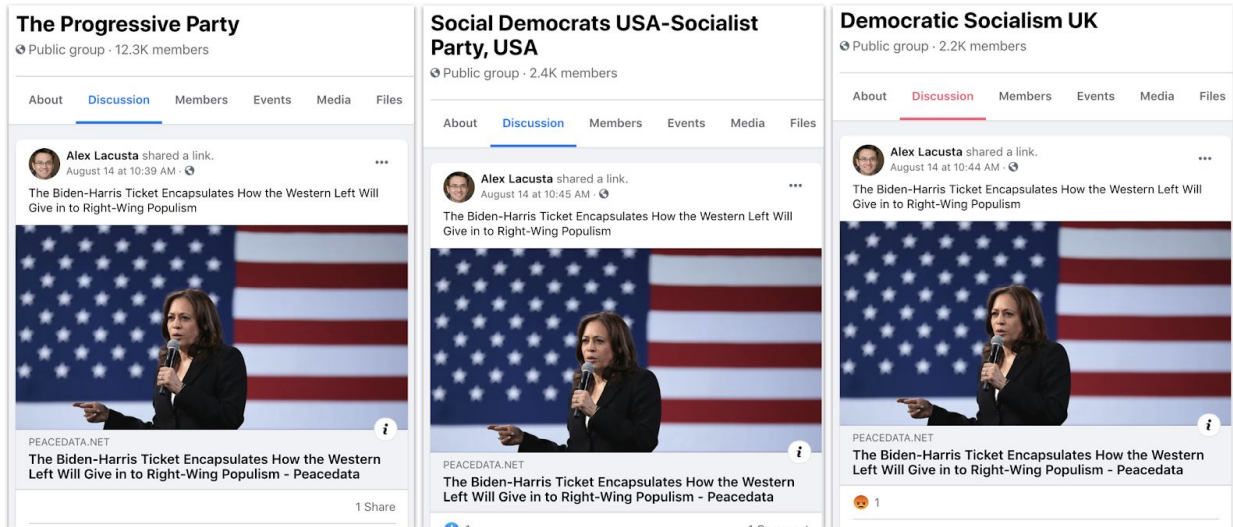
- [Chelsea Manning Spends Her Birthday Behind Bars](#) (copied from mintpressnews[.]com)
- [Prosecution Of Truth: Brief History Of Julian Assange's Case](#)
- [Vindictive court rulings prove British state wants Assange dead](#) (copied from the World Socialist Website)
- [Will Trump Pardon Edward Snowden?](#)

These articles systematically presented Assange and the leakers as victims of an oppressive system. Snowden, for example, was termed a "[global hero](#)," and Manning was labeled a "[fighter against the concealment of the truth](#)" who was subjected to "police state viciousness." The court case against Assange was referred to as a "[kangaroo court](#)," "[political persecution](#)," and a "[perceived international conspiracy](#)." Assange himself was described as "[rotting to death](#)" in a UK prison, the victim of "[Starmer's crusade against whistleblowing](#)," and a victim of "[mendacious and vindictive](#)" treatment by the UK legal system.

The PeaceData website also referenced Wikileaks in its coverage of another issue: the chemical attacks on civilians in Douma, Syria, in April 2018. On [five occasions between December 2019](#) and May 2020, peacedata[.]net reproduced articles that alleged, based on Wikileaks leaks, that the Organization for the Prevention of Chemical Weapons (OPCW) had doctored its report on the Douma attack. PeaceData's decision to reproduce these reports is consistent with earlier Russian operations against the OPCW, notably the attempt by agents from Russian military intelligence to [hack the OPCW](#) in April 2018.

Targeting

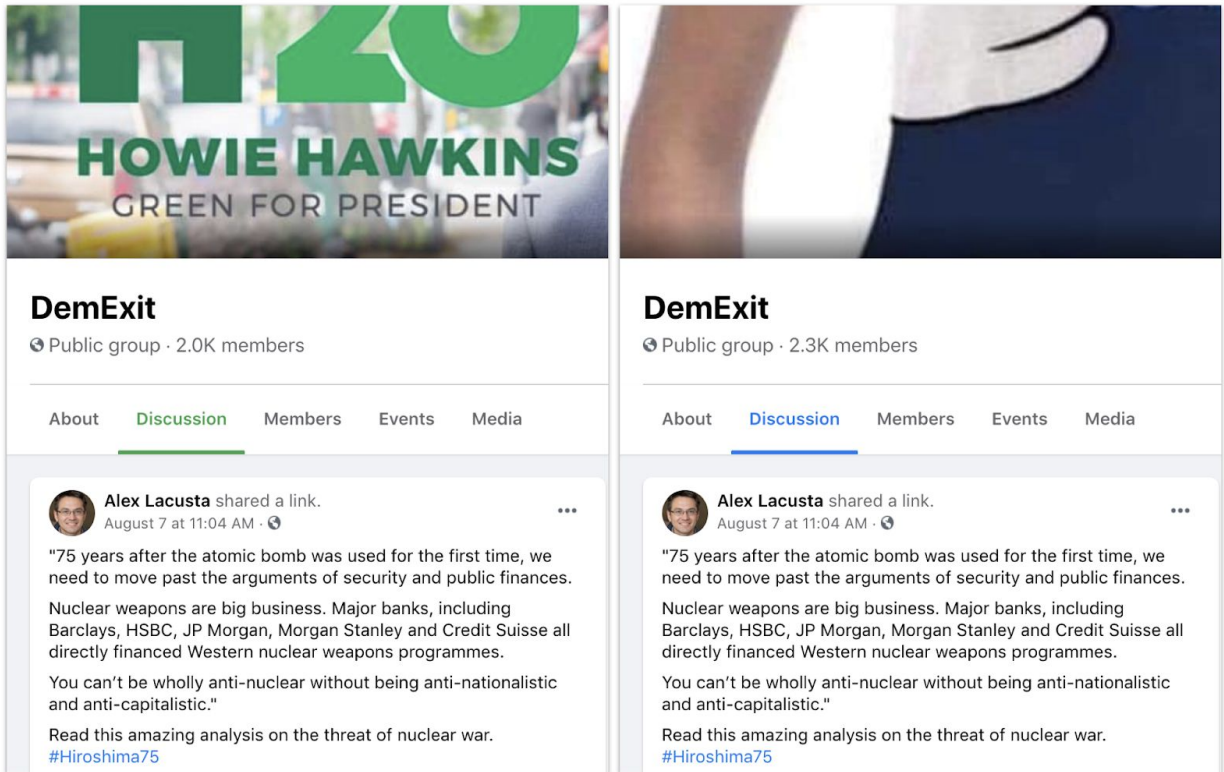
The operation focused very strongly on progressive and left-wing groups in the United States and the United Kingdom. In the U.S., it prioritized supporters of Senator Bernie Sanders, Green Party leader Howie Hawkins, and self-identified Democratic Socialists. In the UK, the network prioritized supporters of former Labour Party leader Jeremy Corbyn.



Posts by operation asset Alex Lacusta of a PeaceData article attacking Biden and Harris, shared to groups "The Progressive Party," "Social Democrats USA-Socialist Party, USA," and "Democratic Socialism UK."

The operation's most active inauthentic asset was the Alex Lacusta persona. Using the CrowdTangle analytical tool, which is owned by Facebook, Graphika discovered a large number of posts that this persona made to Facebook groups. Each post shared a link to a PeaceData article, together with a stub of text, typically quoting directly from the article in question – possibly as a way to reduce the scope for language errors by copying existing content. We assert with high confidence that the persona was run directly by the operation, since it was identified as a PeaceData editor both on its own account and on the PeaceData website. As such, the groups it posted to represent a list of targets chosen by the operation itself and thus reveal which communities the operation was most eager to influence.

Overall, the operation had a clear preference for groups that identified with socialism in general and the Democratic Socialism movement in particular and for groups that *opposed* the mainstream Democratic Party, as represented by Biden and Harris. The Alex Lacusta persona posted articles to six different groups that referenced socialism and Democratic Socialism; four groups that identified themselves as "progressives"; and two groups focused on "DemExit," a call for voters to leave the Democratic Party and create their own, more progressive alternative. This resembles the original IRA's [attempts in 2016](#) to engage with left-wing Democrats, especially supporters of Senator Bernie Sanders, and discourage them from voting for Hillary Clinton.



Shares by Alex Lacusta of an article on nuclear weapons to two "DemExit" groups. The two posts together achieved five likes and two shares.

This was not Alex Lacusta's only focus, however. The account also shared links in groups that focused on the environment, the plight of the Palestinians, Venezuela, race and police brutality, Native Americans, and supporters of Julian Assange.

The following list represents the names of all the groups to which the Alex Lacusta persona shared PeaceData articles, together with the number of different articles that the persona posted there. This is unlikely to represent the operation's entire activity, as some accounts were taken down, apparently by automated systems, before Graphika could analyze them, but it is the most comprehensive overview we have so far of this operation's targeting.

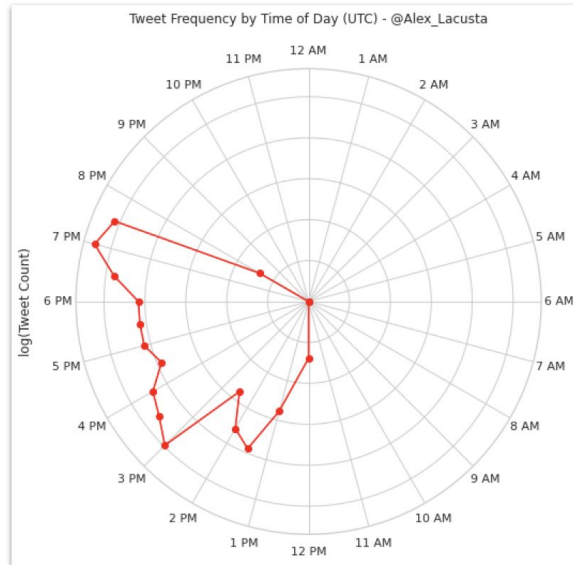
| Group | Count of URL of post | No. comments | No. members/followers | No. reactions | No. shares |
|---|----------------------|--------------|-----------------------|---------------|------------|
| International Relations and Politics | 6 | 0 | 6,009 | 11 | 4 |
| Democratic Socialists of America - EcoSocialism & GND | 6 | 0 | 2,296 | 0 | 1 |
| DemExit 1 | 6 | 1 | 2,312 | 9 | 9 |
| Socialism - Social Democracy - Democratic Socialism | 5 | 0 | 2,400 | 3 | 1 |
| Social Democrats USA-Socialist Party, USA | 5 | 9 | 2,361 | 7 | 9 |
| Labour for Democratic Socialism | 5 | 0 | 12,546 | 15 | 5 |
| Democratic Socialism UK | 5 | 5 | 2,170 | 18 | 2 |
| DemExit 2 | 5 | 0 | 1,595 | 11 | 5 |
| The Progressive Party | 4 | 1 | 12,322 | 7 | 10 |
| Save Earth... Save Water... Protect environment.... | 3 | 0 | 8,816 | 2 | 1 |
| Save "Our" Planet. | 3 | 0 | 8,305 | 23 | 4 |
| Politics of the U.S.A. | 3 | 6 | 2,256 | 5 | 1 |
| The World Socialist Movement | 2 | 3 | 1,499 | 2 | 1 |
| Stand With Venezuela | 2 | 3 | 1,114 | 18 | 8 |
| Progressives Against Neoliberalism | 2 | 5 | 4,298 | 5 | 4 |
| Presidential Agenda Bernie Sanders 2020 | 2 | 0 | 8,162 | 4 | 2 |
| Hands off Venezuela / Iran - NJ | 2 | 0 | 191 | 0 | 0 |
| Environmental and Climate News..... | 2 | 0 | 17,377 | 2 | 0 |
| 21st Century Building of a Progressive Party | 2 | 4 | 7,218 | 13 | 6 |
| Union Members: Defund Police, Tax the Rich, Fund Education & Housing! | 1 | 0 | 8,583 | 15 | 6 |
| Progressive Liberals Who Hate Trump! | 1 | 0 | 1,251 | 0 | 0 |
| Police Brutality | 1 | 1 | 1,377 | 5 | 2 |
| Palestine Exists Palestine Resists | 1 | 0 | 5,117 | 0 | 0 |
| Native Americans | 1 | 2 | 6,063 | 42 | 15 |
| NAAPB-National Association Against Police Brutality | 1 | 0 | 5,979 | 10 | 1 |
| Julian Assange's Angels | 1 | 17 | 16,557 | 197 | 85 |
| International Relations and Political Science | 1 | 0 | 21,010 | 8 | 0 |
| FREE PALESTINE..! | 1 | 0 | 4,009 | 3 | 0 |
| Free Palestine | 1 | 2 | 24,507 | 26 | 5 |
| Free Julian Assange | 1 | 19 | 16,485 | 213 | 82 |
| Free and love to Palestine <3 | 1 | 1 | 10,537 | 23 | 6 |
| Environmental Updates | 1 | 0 | 24,917 | 2 | 1 |

The groups to which Alex Lacusta shared PeaceData articles, together with the number of shares to each group, the size of the group, and the reactions the post received. The follower numbers were collected on August 25-26.

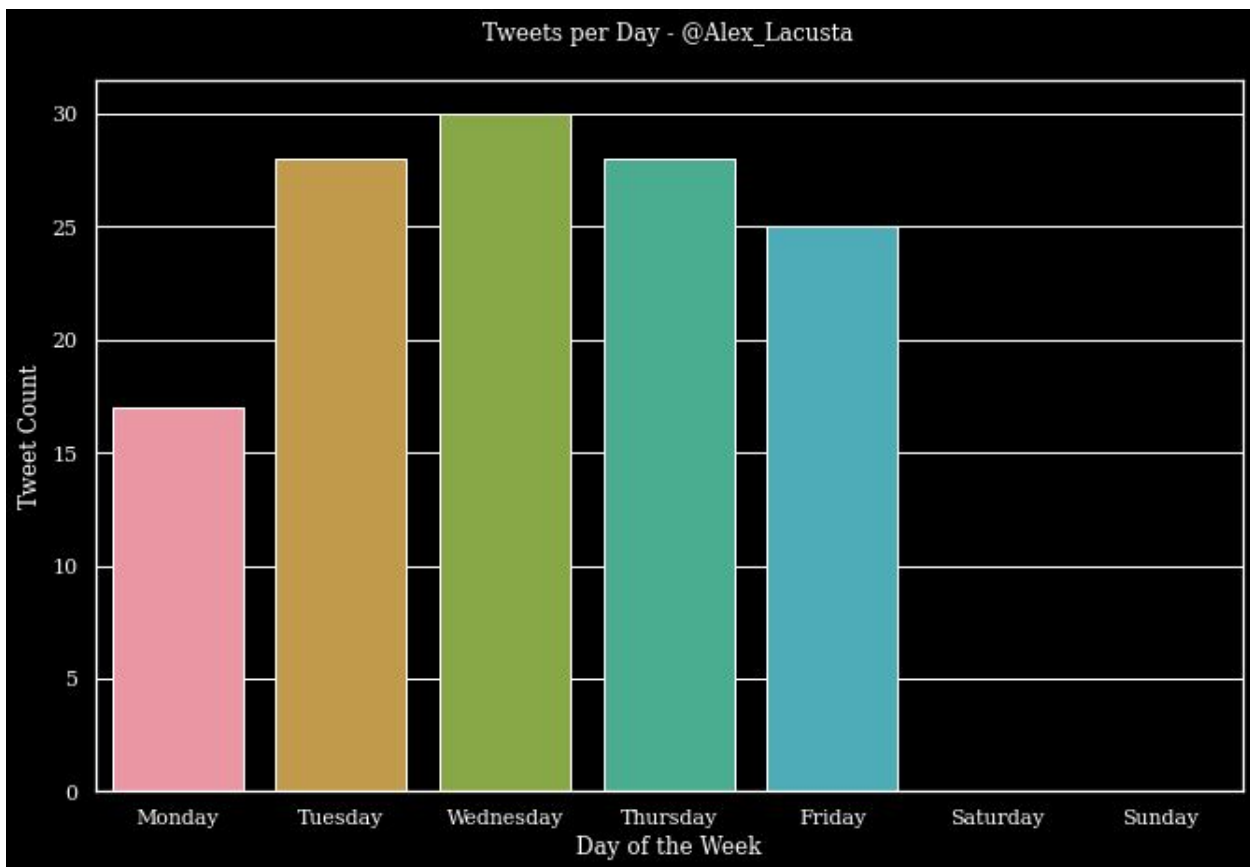
Inauthentic Networking

The website and Facebook assets were not the whole extent of the network. As mentioned above, a number of PeaceData personas, including Alice Schultz, Alex Lacusta, and Albert Popescu, were also present on Twitter; all three were taken down in August but left [traces](#) in [Google caches](#).

These assets had a very regular pattern of posting. For example, all the tweets that the operation account @Alex_Lacusta made were posted from Monday to Friday and within a roughly eight-hour shift.

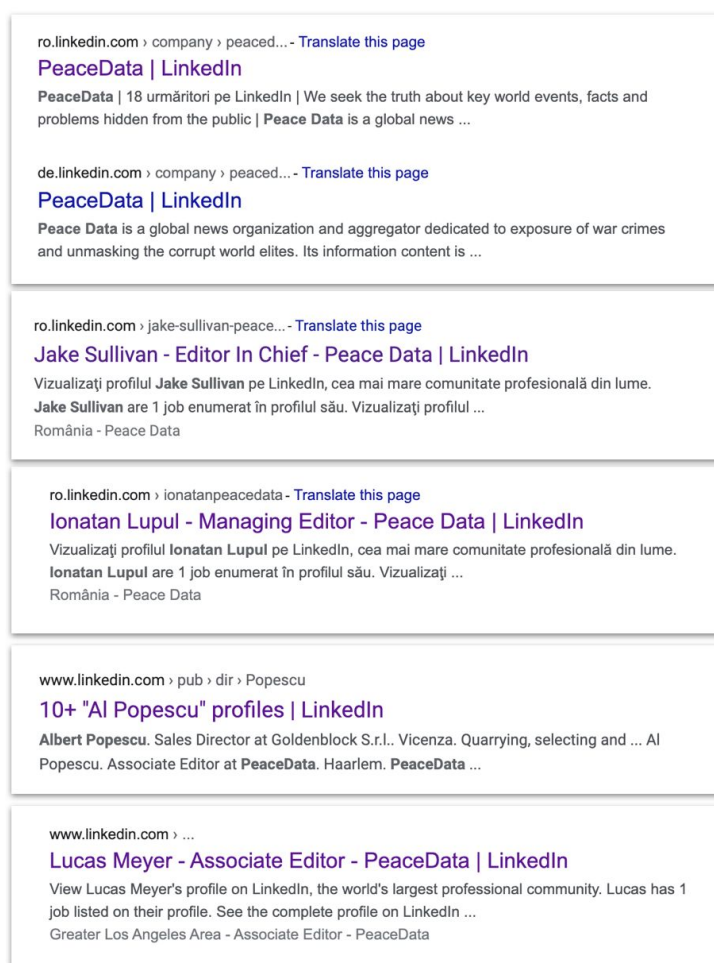


Polar plot of tweets by @Alex_Lacusta showing the regularity of its posts. (Time in UTC.)



Graph of tweets by @Alex_Lacusta broken down by day.

The operation also maintained a heavy presence on LinkedIn. Again, the accounts were taken down before the end of August, but Google searches revealed the remains of accounts for PeaceData itself and for most of its purported staff. A number of these were registered in Romania, in line with the management of the Facebook page; others, such as Ionatan Lupul and Albert Popescu, featured Romanian names. Still others claimed locations across the United States and Europe.

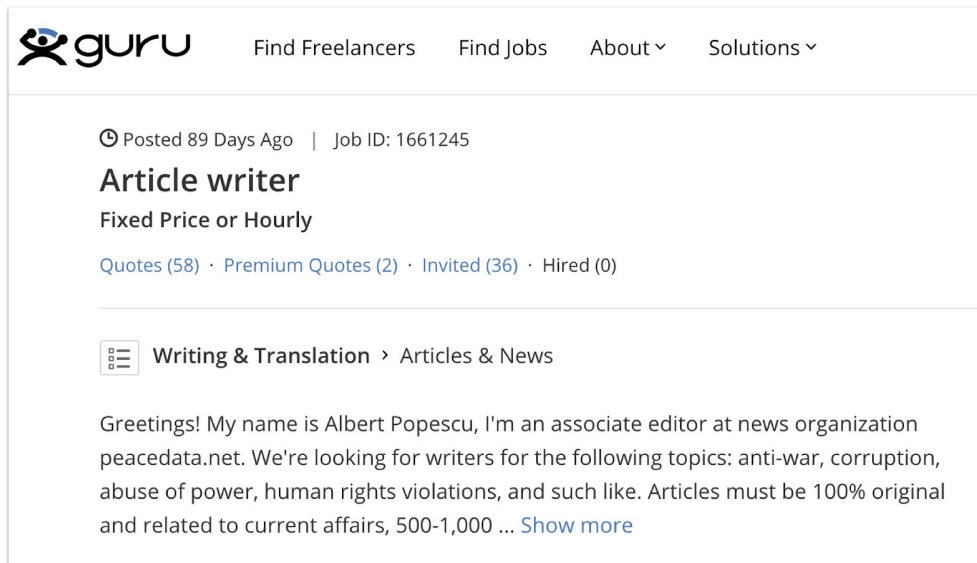


Results of Google searches for PeaceData on LinkedIn.

The operation used this inauthentic network for inauthentic networking: it advertised for freelance writers to provide its content. This was a cross-platform effort and involved not only tweets but ads on a variety of freelance sites. Of note, an ad on [Upwork](#) underlined that “the themes are always discussed and agreed with an author.” This is a rare indication of the detail of PeaceData’s editorial process. The Upwork ad also gave a fixed price of \$75 for its articles and said that it was looking for no fewer than 10 “freelancers with the lowest rates.”



Cached tweet by @peacedata_, now suspended, advertising for passionate writers willing to be published for not much money, which is the fate of passionate writers.



Cached excerpt from an advertisement on the freelancers' website guru.com in the name of Albert Popescu, advertising for writers on "anti-war, corruption, abuse of power, human rights violations, and such like."

Contributing Writer

Content Writing
Posted 9 days ago

Needs to hire 10 Freelancers

Peace Data is a young international news organization focused on raising awareness about corruption, environmental crisis, abuse of power, armed conflicts, activism, and human rights.

Our project is looking for dedicated freelance writers/journalists to join our team. If you are interested in covering stories that are usually untold or kept hidden from the general public, we will be glad to work together.

We offer regular payments as we receive the materials. We always give all the credits to our authors. The themes are always discussed and agreed with an author.

\$75
Fixed-price

Entry level
I am looking for freelancers with the lowest rates

Project Type: Ongoing project

Skills and Expertise

Content Writing Services

Copywriting Jobs Research Jobs

Fact Checking Jobs

Written Languages

English Jobs

Post a Job Like This

To start freelancing through Upwork, apply now.

This and other jobs await your proposal.

Apply as a Freelancer

About the client

Germany
09:31 pm

1 job posted
0% hire rate, 1 open job

Member since Jul 22, 2020

PeaceData advert placed on [UpWork](#) on August 20, 2020, for 10 freelancers. Note the claim of a German location (bottom right) and the fixed price of \$75 (center left). Note also the search for freelancers with the lowest rates.

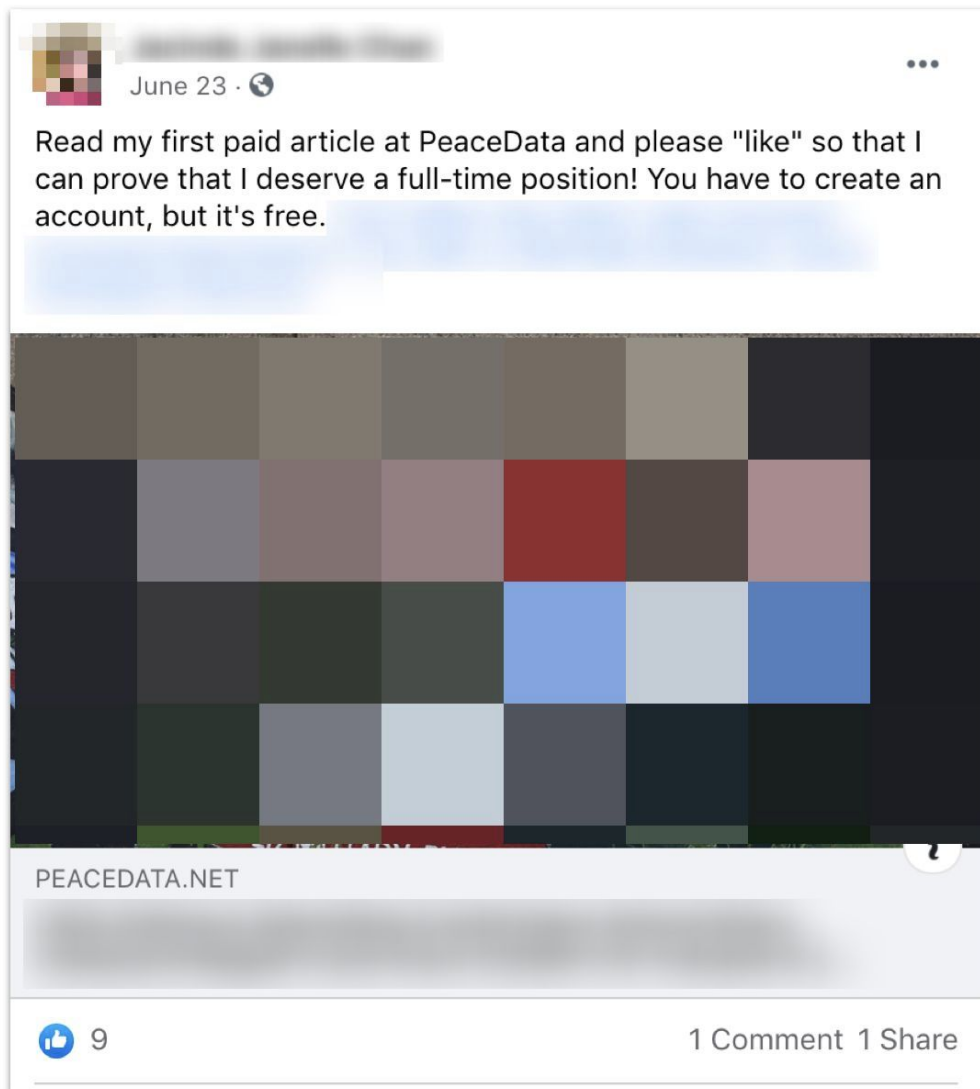
Peace Data @peacedata_

Apr 15 • 6:34 AM

Hello. I'd like to contact you about the translator job. Could you, please, DM me?

Tweet from @peacedata_ approaching an Arabic to English translator. The tweet did not indicate what "translator job" was intended.

A number of authors responded, and some of them subsequently posted their articles to their own social media accounts. (Graphika has chosen not to publish their names, as they appear to have unwittingly fallen for a deception operation by a sophisticated foreign actor.) Some of the authors had an established portfolio and wrote regularly for other outlets; others indicated that this was their first paid writing job.

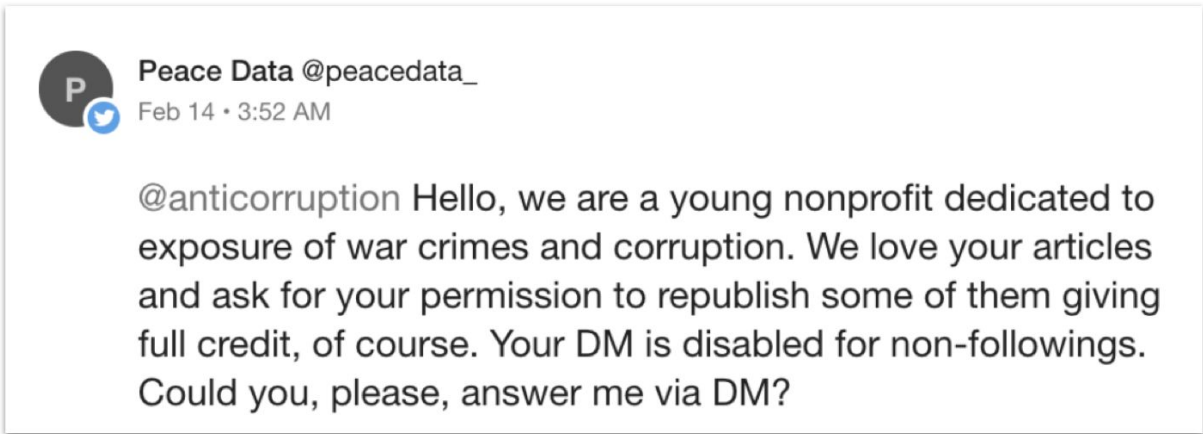


Share of an article on PeaceData by the author; note the reference to the "first paid article" and the referencing to "proving" that they "deserve a full-time position."



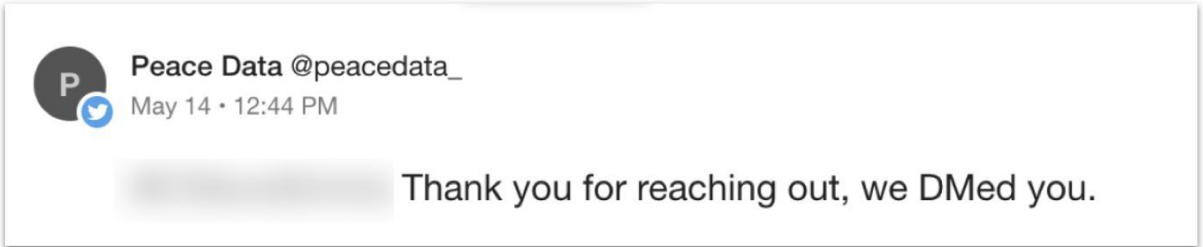
Post by another author, showing their "first article on an independent news source."

As noted above, the operation also copied content from other sources, which it published with attribution. On February 14, 2020, the @peacedata_ Twitter account asked the anti-corruption NGO Transparency International (handle @anticorruption) for permission to reproduce its reporting; on February 25, PeaceData [published](#) a Transparency report.



Preserved tweet from @peacedata_ showing the outreach to Transparency International.

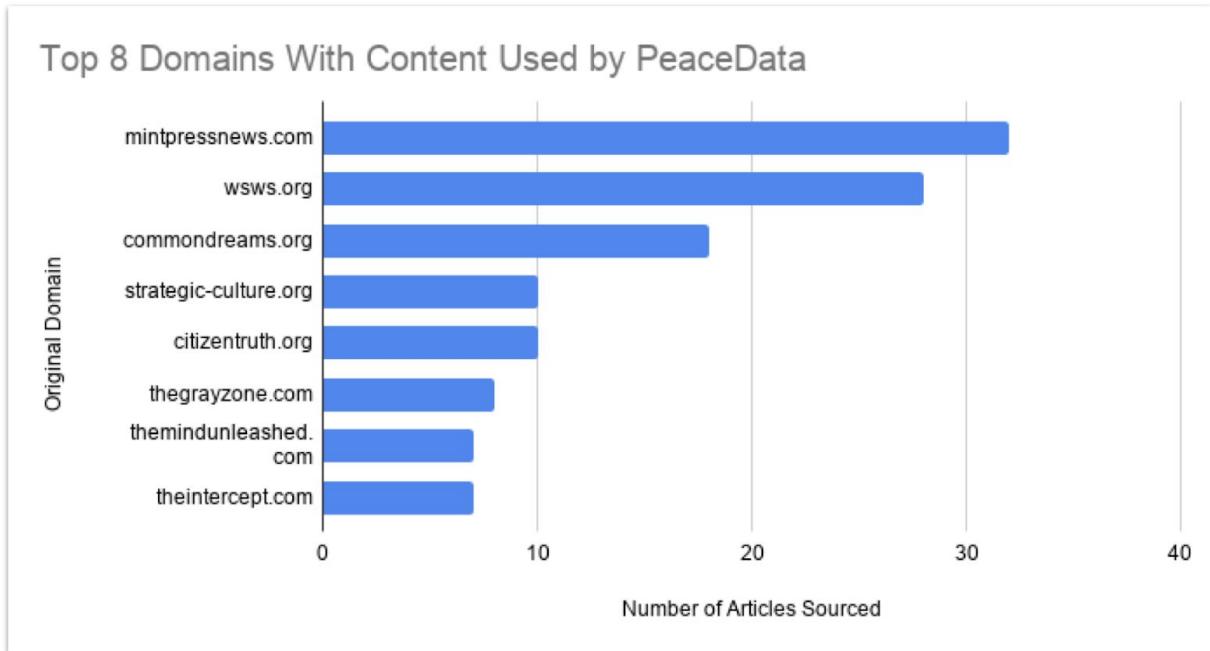
The conversation appears to have gone both ways, with at least one PeaceData tweet indicating that a potential contributor contacted the operation’s Twitter feed.



Preserved tweet from PeaceData showing the outreach from another user.

Partners and Sources

PeaceData’s efforts to build a persona and an audience went beyond GAN-generated profile pictures and posts to Facebook groups. As we have noted, its early posts in English – from December through mid-January – exclusively reproduced content from better known websites without naming the author, although they did provide a link to the source. From mid-January until March, they continued copying external articles but added the author bylines. All these articles appear to have been chosen from a roster of sites whose content would appeal either to a progressive audience or to an anti-Western one: this appears to have been an attempt to give the website an authentic feel and political stance before it began searching for freelance writers.

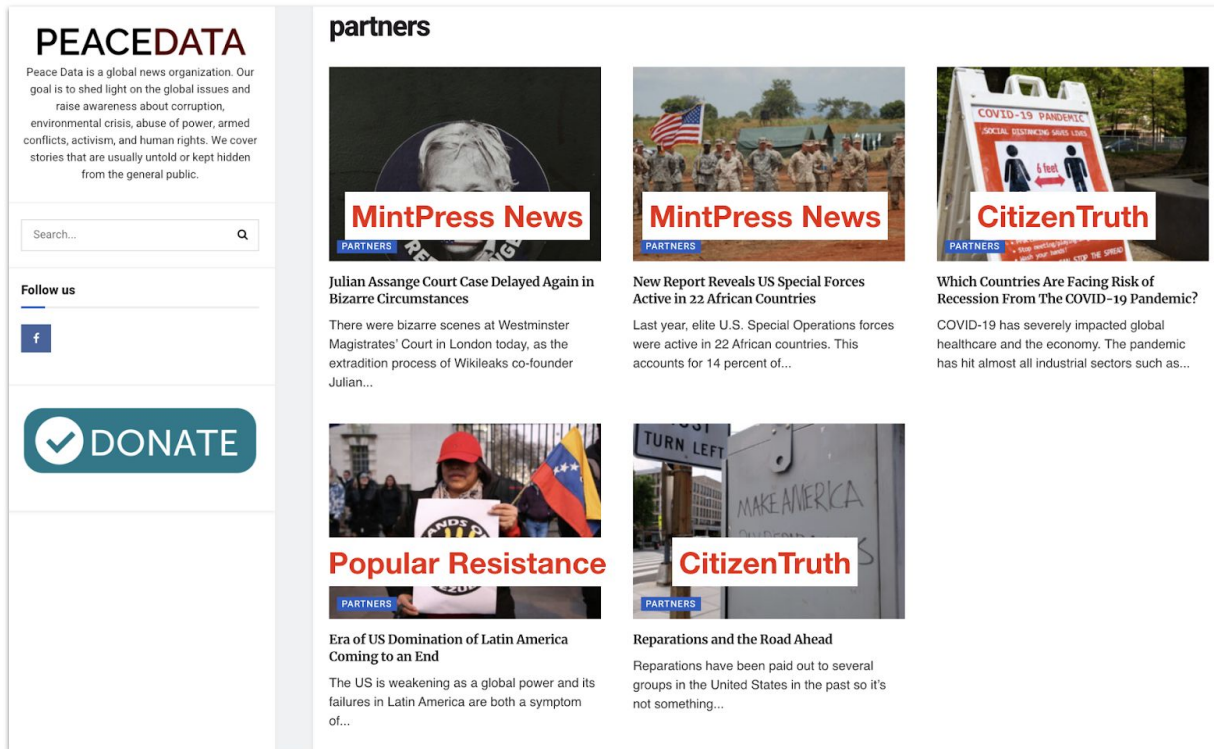


Main sources for copied articles without credit on the PeaceData website, December 2019 - February 2020.

The most quoted website during this initial period was Mint Press News, a U.S.-based site with a focus on the Middle East that has [described](#) U.S. foreign policy as “an imperialist agenda that believes it’s possible for America to bomb its way out of every difficult situation.” In all, PeaceData copied 32 articles from this source. In second place, with 28 shares, was the World Socialist Website (wsws.org). The third most popular was CommonDreams.org, billed as “breaking news & views for the progressive community,” and the fourth was the Strategic Culture Foundation, a Russian think tank whose [founders](#) are linked to the Russian Academy of Sciences. Other important sources included a website called The Mind Unleashed, [self-billed](#) as a “Conscious Media Aggregation organization,” and Citizen Truth, billed as “alternative news for free thinkers, independents, and political misfits.” The final website among the eight most shared was thegrayzone.com, a pro-Kremlin site based in the United States.

Some of these early shares came directly from state-aligned media. PeaceData copied two articles from the pro-Kremlin outlet SouthFront and translated a French-language article from the Kremlin outlet RT. However, it also shared a small number of articles from the Iranian outlets PressTV and the Tehran Times and from the Chinese state outlets Xinhua and the Global Times.

On five occasions, PeaceData published articles that it listed as “[partners](#).” Between August 11 and August 19, the website published two articles each from [Citizen Truth](#) and [MintPress News](#) and one from [Popular Resistance](#), a website that traces its origins to the [Occupy Movement](#) of 2011.



The “partners” section of the PeaceData website showing the five articles published in August.

The exact nature and mechanism of these partnerships has not been made public. However, on August 13, CitizenTruth.org published an [article](#) by PeaceData on the QAnon conspiracy. Popular Resistance, meanwhile, published [five articles](#) by PeaceData between June 29 and August 25, concerning, respectively, [U.S.-Saudi cooperation on nuclear power](#), [U.S. “aggression” against Venezuela](#), [claims of the U.S. military assassinating journalists](#), the protests in Belarus as [“Western regime change,”](#) and [defense spending as a driver of white supremacism](#).

It is unclear whether these shares were part of an existing partnership or a precursor to it, but such cross-posting gave PeaceData access to more content, a broader amplification network, and an aura of legitimacy in the audiences where these outlets were seen as authoritative. However, the extra reach appears to have been limited. For example, Popular Resistance [tweeted](#) the Belarus article but received only two retweets and four likes; it does not appear to have tweeted the other articles. Similarly, Citizen Truth posted the QAnon article on [Facebook twice](#) but received only two reactions, one comment, and no shares.

Overall, PeaceData struggled to make a measurable impact. The web articles showed few reactions; the social media posts generally did not receive many engagements. In fact, the operation’s greatest success — to the extent that it had any — lay in its ability to co-opt unwitting authors to write its content. The IRA’s 13 accounts managed to deceive that pinpoint audience; they do not appear to have reached a substantially larger one.

The image features a dark, starry background with numerous small white specks. Overlaid on this are several bright orange-red light trails. These trails are most prominent in the lower right quadrant, where they form a dense, curved, and somewhat chaotic pattern that resembles a stylized letter 'A' or a similar shape. Some trails are straight and extend from the top right towards the center, while others are more intricate and looped.

Graphika

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