

Conspiracy Clickbait

Case Study 2: Raking in the Views

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About this publication

In the field of disinformation and conspiracy theories, there has been a tendency for policymakers and practitioners to focus on state-linked operations and to overlook the role of commercially motivated networks. However, the rise of a global industry producing conspiracy clickbait for profit is likely to have significant implications.

This report explores three case studies of how networks linked to individuals in Vietnam are using QAnon conspiracy theories and US political disinformation to generate revenue. These case studies illustrate that although the motive may be commercial, the effect of such networks is to deepen political division and amplify conspiracy theories and disinformation. While each individual network may only have a small impact, the cumulative impact of many such networks around the world may be profound. This growing industry is disproportionately targeted at the US, and therefore should be of particular concern for US policymakers and practitioners.

About the author

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Operation overview

This case study looks at an operation on Telegram and YouTube which is targeting QAnon, MAGA and US conspiracy audiences to generate revenue from YouTube ads and sell Trump and QAnon-themed merchandise.

The network has been successful in building a significant audience. As of 19 October, its Telegram channels have more than 43,681 members collectively. Its channels routinely rack up tens or hundreds of thousands of daily views.

These channels or individual videos are frequently removed by YouTube, likely in response to automated spam detection. Deleted channels are almost immediately replaced by new channels which have been repurposed from previous activity, in particular from streaming gaming videos in Vietnamese. In some cases, the channel names are changed to titles like 'Breaking News USA' or 'USA Patriots 247' which are clearly intended to appeal to American audiences.

There is a clear effort to tailor the operation to target QAnon audiences. The network uses QAnon hashtags and slogans, amplifies QAnon narratives and plagiarizes the content of QAnon influencers. In November 2021, the network also began advertising explicitly QAnon-themed apparel, alongside other pro-Trump merchandise.

ISD was not able to attribute this network directly to any individual or group, although as with the other case studies in this series, there are indications that this activity may have links to Vietnam. There is no evidence to suggest a political motive behind this activity. The most likely motive appears to be profiting from YouTube advertising traffic and merchandise sales. Despite its relative simplicity, this appears to be an efficient and effective commercial operation.

Content

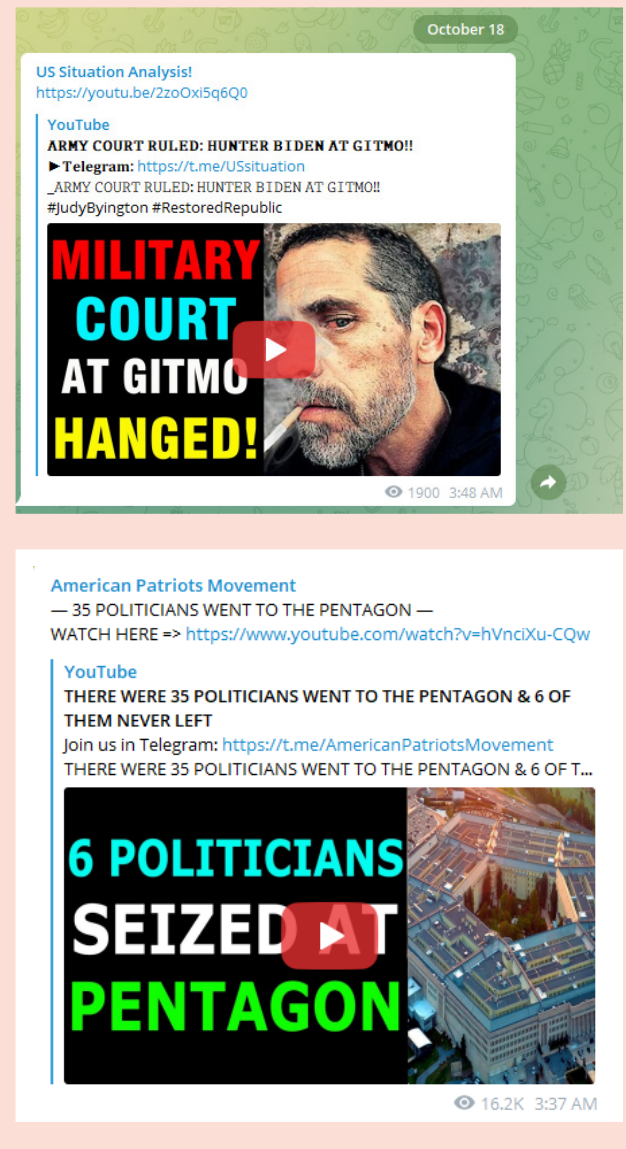
This network appears to be the source of the content being broadcast as livestreams discussed in Case Study 1. Another notable feature is the use of the #RestoredRepublic hashtag, which this network shares in common with the operation discussed in Case Study 3. The three networks are not linking directly to one another, however, and the nature of the relationship between them is unclear.

The videos consist of audio taken from a range of QAnon and pro-Trump conspiracy sources, including podcasts and livestream shows. This audio is overlaid on various generic images, many of them watermarked with 'copyright @X-MEDIAT' or 'copyright @X-MEDIAM', with an animated animal in the top corner and a small talking person in the bottom corner. This person talks as the video plays, but not in sync with the audio. It appears to be generic stock content, similarly to the moving animal in the other corner.

Fig 1: Screenshots of videos uploaded by the network, showing distinctive features such as the animated animal in one corner and small talking person in the other.



Fig 2: Screenshots of Telegram posts.



There are a number of companies named X-Media, including one based in Vietnam. It is not clear what if any connections these companies have to this network, however. ISD did not find further evidence suggesting a link between the Vietnam-based company and this network. The purpose or meaning of the animal animations is also unclear.

The benefit of this type of content is that it attracts highly engaged audiences, but is likely quick and easy to produce. The elements of the videos – the animations, the background images – are used across multiple

videos. Producing a new video is likely to be as simple as snipping out a segment of audio from a source and adding it into an existing template.

The narratives amplified by the network consist of divisive political content, conspiracy theories and outright disinformation. QAnon is the overwhelmingly dominant conspiracy theory in the content promoted by the network.

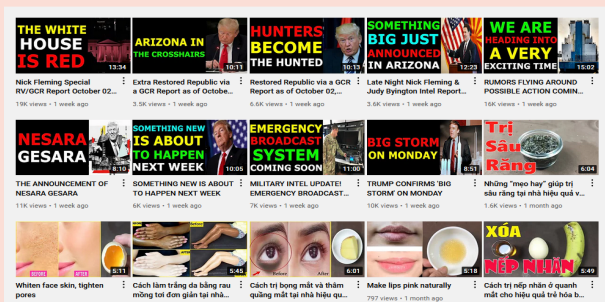
YouTube assets

At the time of ISD’s investigation in early October 2021, the network was operating at least a dozen active YouTube channels.

The network's pattern of activity, which involves uploading a large number of videos in a very short space of time, leads to its channels being deleted by YouTube on a regular basis, likely as a result of automated spam detection. This seems to cause no substantial disruption to the network's operations, as deleted channels are simply replaced. The true number of channels used by the network over time is therefore difficult to establish due to the rapid pace at which the network churns through and replaces channels.

All of the channels have been recycled from other revenue-generating activities. In some cases, as in the below example, they have previously been used to publish clickbait videos in Vietnamese, English or Bangla.

Fig 3: Screenshot of 'We the People 247' YouTube channel, showing a recent shift from publishing Vietnamese and English clickbait videos to QAnon and pro-Trump content.



Other channels have previously been used for gaming (also in Vietnamese) or producing entertainment content.

Some channels have a 'verified' tick from YouTube. This presumably reflects that they were verified for their previous use, before being repurposed or otherwise taken over by the current operation. Verified accounts are often sold at a premium by vendors who re-sell social media accounts, because verification can help an operation appear more credible.

In some cases, as in the examples above, extra spaces or characters have been added to video titles, likely in an effort to evade automated content moderation algorithms.

Fig 4: Screenshots of 'Nobab Tv' YouTube channel, a verified account which shifted from content in Bengali to English-language pro-Trump and QAnon content.

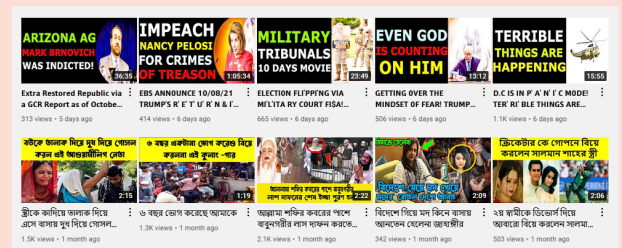
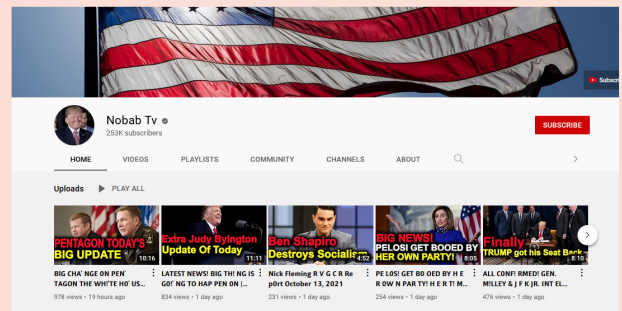
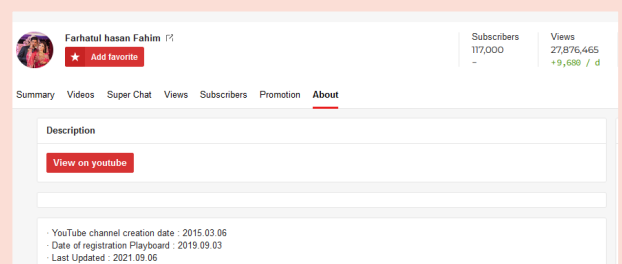
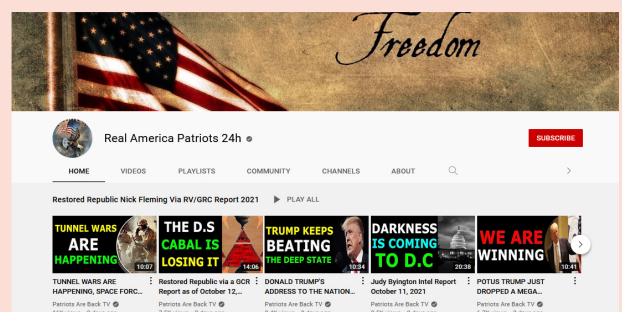


Fig 5: Screenshot of 'Real America Patriots 24h' YouTube channel; screenshot of cached Playboard results for the same channel.



For some channels, there has been an attempt to present the channel as a legitimate source of information for US viewers. This includes renaming channels to things like ‘We the People 247’ or ‘US Breaking News,’ and changing header images to appeal to a US audience.

In the example below, a channel has been renamed to ‘Real America Patriots 24h’ and given a header image including the American flag and the word ‘Freedom.’ Cached Playboard data indicates that the channel was previously named ‘Farhatul hasan Fahim’ and was located in Bangladesh.

In other cases, however, there has been no apparent effort to customize repurposed channels for their new audience.

The strategy of the network operators appears to be aiming for high volumes of traffic rather than building convincing long-term channels. This supports the hypothesis that this is a commercial rather than politically driven operation; the goal is quick clicks, not long-term influence.

Once a channel is added to the network, large volumes of videos are uploaded in quick succession. Generally, the pattern is a new video uploaded roughly every hour or half hour, with a 10-12 hour pause at certain points in the day. Somewhere between 12 to 20 videos per day for each channel appears to be a normal range of uploads.

This pattern of uploading appears to suggest that the network operators may be doing uploads manually, rather than scheduling in advance. The 10-12 hour gap presumably reflects when the operators finish work for the day.

This rapid-fire strategy is likely driven by a desire to shovel out as much content – and therefore to monetize as many ad views – as possible before each channel is detected and deleted, or before videos are removed.

It is difficult to establish a precise estimate for how much money the network may be generating. This is partly because of the instability in the number of channels which are active at any one time, but it is also because indicative guides for YouTube ad earnings from tools

Fig 6: Screenshot of ‘Singer Nasir’ channel, which is now part of the network. No effort has been made to disguise its previous use as a promotional channel for a Bangladeshi singer.

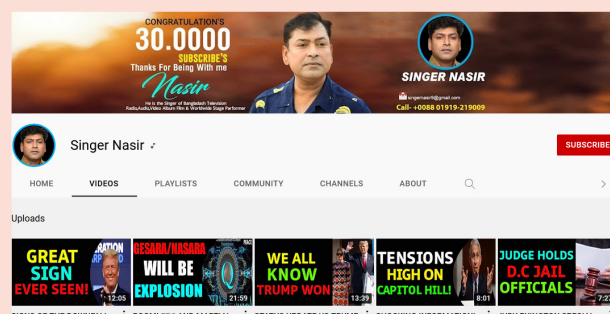


Fig 7: Screenshot of Social Blade estimates for ad earnings for Huyñ Bi TV channel. The numbers in green and red represent daily views (for example +15,020 in green means there were 15,020 views that day) while the following number is the total views for the channel over time.

| DATE | SUBSCRIBERS | VIDEO VIEWS | ESTIMATED EARNINGS |
|----------------|-------------|-------------|---------------------------|
| 2021-10-04 Mon | 280K | +15,020 | 94,544,686 \$5 - \$78 |
| 2021-10-05 Tue | +1K 281K | +16,455 | 94,561,141 \$5 - \$86 |
| 2021-10-06 Wed | 281K | +20,091 | 94,581,232 \$7 - \$104 |
| 2021-10-07 Thu | 281K | +77,816 | 94,659,048 \$25 - \$405 |
| 2021-10-08 Fri | +1K 282K | +80,612 | 94,739,660 \$26 - \$419 |
| 2021-10-09 Sat | 282K | +64,810 | 94,804,470 \$21 - \$337 |
| 2021-10-10 Sun | 282K | +13,957 | 94,818,427 \$5 - \$73 |
| 2021-10-11 Mon | 282K | +21,495 | 94,839,922 \$7 - \$112 |
| 2021-10-12 Tue | 282K | +14,234 | 94,854,156 \$5 - \$74 |
| 2021-10-13 Wed | 282K | +14,956 | 94,869,112 \$5 - \$78 |
| 2021-10-14 Thu | 282K | +10,626 | 94,879,738 \$3 - \$55 |
| 2021-10-15 Fri | 282K | -55,750 | 94,823,988 \$-18 - \$-290 |
| 2021-10-16 Sat | 282K | +10,793 | 94,834,781 \$4 - \$56 |

such as Social Blade vary broadly, by up to a factor of ten or more. The example below shows estimates for ad earnings for one network channel between 4-16 October.

Based on this, it seems reasonable to assume that across all of its channels, the network is likely to be collectively generating at least several hundred US dollars per day in ad revenue.

As of July 2021, the per capita income in Vietnam was around US\$183 per month.¹ If it is indeed the case that the operators are based in Vietnam, the network’s earnings could provide a very reasonable income even if shared across several people.

Telegram channels

In addition to the YouTube channels, the network is also running at least four Telegram channels with a collective 43,681 followers as of 18 October. The three channels were created on 9 May, 8 July, 14 July and 1 October. The YouTube videos link to the Telegram channels in their descriptions.

The relatively small and stable number of Telegram channels (in comparison to the large and ever-revolving carousel of YouTube channels) reflects that on Telegram, content moderation by the platform is much less of an issue for networks such as this.

This lax, or absent, content moderation is also why a large proportion of the QAnon community has shifted from more mainstream social media platforms onto Telegram, making it an ideal fit for a commercial operation such as this which targets QAnon audiences.

The channels are relatively simple and all follow the same pattern. Their names are some version of 'American Patriots', they have a profile picture of Donald Trump, and in the initial days after creation they post a series of pro-Trump posts and memes and encourage people to share their posts. This is likely to be intended to help build a pro-Trump following for the channels.

After the first few days, however, this shifts into simply posting YouTube links and that pattern has continued to hold steady for all Telegram channels over the following months.

The role of the Telegram channels appears to be as a stable point of engagement for audiences, directing them towards new channels and videos as the previous generation are removed. It also allows the network to tap into the large QAnon community on Telegram.

Content from the network's channels is being shared across other QAnon, conspiracy, anti-lockdown and pro-Trump channels on the platform, although the opaque nature of Telegram makes it difficult to know how widely this is happening and whether it is organic or coordinated behavior.

Fig 8: Screenshot of video description linking to Telegram channel.

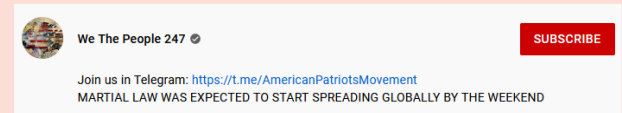
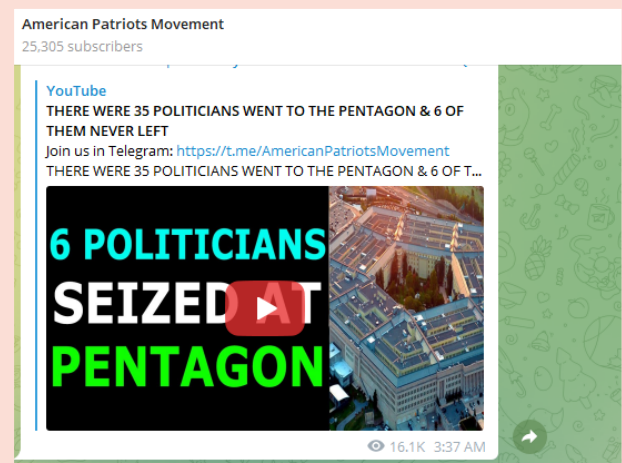


Fig 9: Screenshot of early post in Telegram channel.



Fig 10: Screenshot of posts in Telegram channel.



Merchandise

In early November 2021, the network also began advertising merchandise on its Telegram and YouTube channels.

On 31 October, the domain 'funnyaf.store' was registered and turned into an online store using what appears to be a generic e-commerce service, using Stripe and PayPal as payment processors. From 9 November onwards, the network began to advertise hoodies and t-shirts with pro-Trump, anti-vaccine and QAnon messages on its channels.

As with other parts of this operation, relatively little effort has been put into making the online store appear legitimate. For example, the About page features a single line from *Alice in Wonderland*, and Trump's name has been misspelled in the 'Donal[d] Trump' category of merchandise.

Whois privacy protections have been used to register the site, but an email address is included in the Terms of Service. This email address appears to be based on a Vietnamese name. According to Have I Been Pwned, a website which tracks data breaches, the email address has appeared in four data breaches including the alleged 2019 breach of TaiLieu, a Vietnamese education website, and a massive breach of Vietnamese tech giant VNG dating back to 2015. While circumstantial, this evidence supports the theory that this network is linked to individuals in Vietnam.

Unfortunately it is not possible to determine how many merchandise sales the network may have made.

Fig 12: Screenshot of funnyaf.store online store.

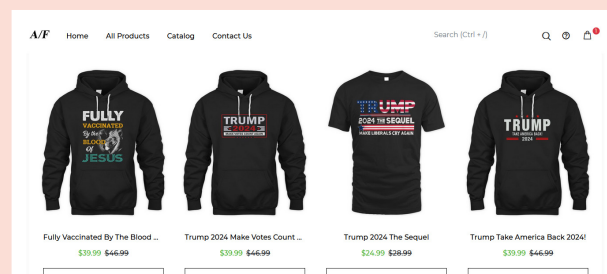
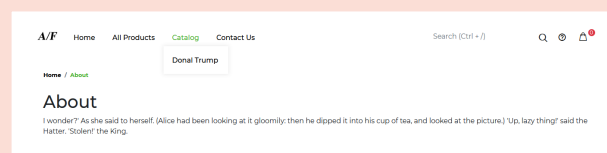


Fig 13: Telegram post on 12 November 2021 advertising a hoodie featuring 'Trump 2022' and the QAnon slogan 'Where We Go One We Go All'.



Fig 14: Screenshot of About page on funnyaf.store, also showing misspelled 'Donal[d] Trump' category.



Engagement and impact

This operation is simple but effective in attracting viewers to its videos. Ultimately, it doesn't matter whether the viewers are fooled into thinking the content is authentic, or whether they are drawn in by simple curiosity about these strange looking videos – either way, the operators get their ad revenue.

It is difficult to determine exactly how viewers are finding the videos. It seems likely that a significant proportion of viewers are coming across the videos shared on Telegram, or when shared by individuals on other social media channels. A thread on 4chan² also indicates that YouTube has been algorithmically recommending the videos to some users.

Fig 15: Screenshot of 4chan thread discussing YouTube recommendations of network channels.

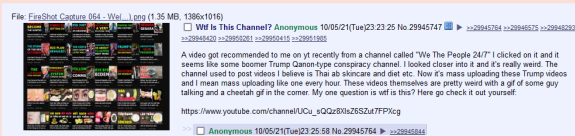
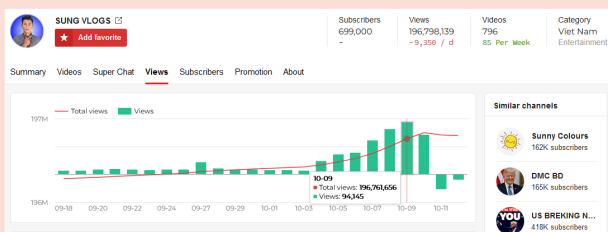


Fig 16: Playboard statistics for Sung Vlogs channel prior to its deletion.



YouTube metrics reflect the lifecycle of the repurposed channels, which see a steady rise in viewership before having videos deleted or being removed by YouTube entirely. A typical example is the Sung Vlogs channel.

As the name suggests, this channel was originally used for vlogging in Vietnamese. On 2 October, it was repurposed and began posting video content from the network. Playboard metrics show a steady rise in daily views as dozens of network videos were uploaded, peaking at 94,145 daily views on 9 October.

Fig 17: Playboard statistics for We the People 247 channel.

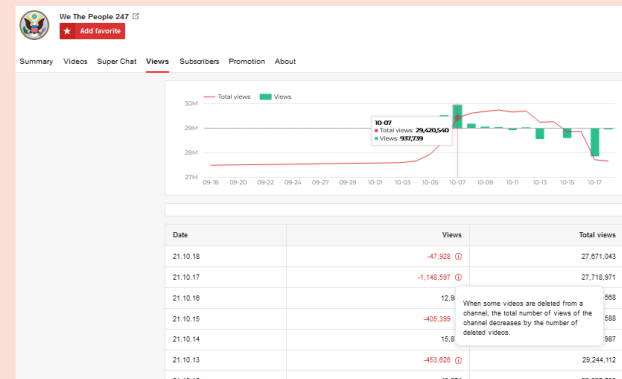


Fig 18: Screenshot of comments on network videos, promoting conspiracy theories and glorifying violence.



On 11 and 12 October, the channel has negative daily views, reflecting that some of its videos were deleted on those dates. On 13 October, the entire channel was removed for violating YouTube's Community Guidelines.

Some of the network's channels have succeeded in going genuinely viral, however temporarily. The channel We The People received almost a million views in a single day on 7 October, only to have over a million views taken off its cumulative total on 17 October as some of its videos were deleted.

Comments on the videos provide a more qualitative indicator of the impact of the network. These comments often promote QAnon and other conspiracy theories; espouse politically divisive views; or appear to glorify violence, for example calling for a military takeover or executions.

The ultimate effect of this operation is that it gives a significant boost to QAnon content and narratives, in pursuit of profit. It takes existing, fringe content and broadcasts it to substantially sized audiences, and provides a space in the comments for believers to engage with one another, reaffirm their views and share still more conspiracy theories. This commercially motivated network is therefore directly fueling the ongoing growth of QAnon and related conspiracy movements.

Endnotes

- 1 VNA, 'Vietnam's average monthly income in 2020 down 1 percent', 6 July 2021,
<https://en.vietnamplus.vn/vietnams-average-monthly-income-in-2020-down-1-percent/204206.vnp>
- 2 <https://archive.md/XnlqZ>



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