

U.S. NEWS

China Aims Disinformation at U.S. Voters

Online actors tied to Beijing are using AI in a bid for covert influence, report says

By DUSTIN VOLZ

SAN FRANCISCO—Online actors linked to the Chinese government are increasingly leveraging artificial intelligence to target voters in the U.S., Taiwan and elsewhere with disinformation, according to new cybersecurity research and U.S. officials.

The Chinese-linked campaigns laundered false information through fake accounts on social-media platforms, seeking to identify divisive domestic political issues and potentially influence elections. The tactics identified in a new cyber-threat report published Friday by Microsoft are among the first uncovered that directly tie the use of generative AI tools to a covert state-sponsored online in-

fluence operation against foreign voters. They also demonstrate more-advanced methods than previously seen.

Accounts on X—some of which were more than a decade old—began posting last year about topics including American drug use, immigration policies, and racial tensions, and in some cases asked followers to share opinions about presidential candidates, potentially to glean insights about U.S. voters' political opinions. In some cases, these posts relied on relatively rudimentary generative AI for their imagery, Microsoft said.

U.S. officials see China's rising clout in global influence operations as a concern because of the evolving trade-craft and ample state resources. Last fall, for example, the U.S. State Department accused the Chinese government of spending billions of dollars annually on a global campaign of disinformation, using investments abroad and an ar-

ray of tactics to promote Beijing's geopolitical aims and stifle criticism of its policies.

In an interview, Tom Burt, Microsoft's head of customer security and trust, said China's disinformation operations have become much more active in the past six months, mirroring rising activity of cyberattacks linked to Beijing.

"We're seeing them experiment," Burt said. "I'm worried about where it might go next."

Separately, Microsoft said it detected a surge of more-sophisticated AI tools in the January presidential election in Taiwan, including an AI-created fake audio clip of a former presidential candidate endorsing one of the remaining candidates. That marked the first time the technology giant's researchers on threats had seen a nation-state actor using AI to attempt to influence a foreign election.

The posts have so far failed to achieve much traction, Microsoft said, but they offer a

preview of state-backed election-influence operations to come. Western intelligence officials have said they have growing concerns about how AI tools could be used to flood elections this year with misleading videos or other content, including in the 2024 U.S. presidential contest. Security experts have said fake AI-generated audio clips pose an especially acute threat because they are relatively easy to manufacture and have been shown to dupe audiences easily.

Chinese government operators "have increased their capabilities to conduct covert influence operations and disseminate disinformation," an annual worldwide threats report from the U.S. intelligence community released recently said. "Even if Beijing sets limits on these activities, individuals not under its direct supervision may attempt election influence activities they perceive are in line with Beijing's goals." The report also

said China was "experimenting with generative AI" and intensifying efforts to mold U.S. discourse on issues including Hong Kong and Taiwan.

Beijing has repeatedly said that it opposes the production and spread of false information and that U.S. social media is inundated with disinformation about China.

The Microsoft report is the latest of several different sets of published research that shed light on disinformation operations linked to Beijing. A new report from the Institute for Strategic Dialogue, a London-based research organization, identified a small number of accounts on X it said were linked to China that were impersonating supporters of former President Donald Trump and attempting to denigrate President Biden.

In one example from November spotlighted in the Microsoft report, China's online army pounced on a train derailment in Kentucky, spread-

ing conspiracies on social media that falsely accused the U.S. government of being responsible. The accounts linked it to long-discredited theories that Pearl Harbor and the 9/11 attacks were both coverups.

In another example, Microsoft said China sought to spread conspiratorial, false narratives across several platforms by alleging that the U.S. government had deliberately started the wildfires along the coast of Maui, Hawaii, by testing a "weather weapon."

The threat actor that Microsoft calls Storm-1376, also known as Spamouflage and Dragonbridge, was responsible for the disinformation campaigns, the report said. It has been tracked by Western cyber-threat researchers since at least 2019. Meta Platforms took down thousands of accounts last year linked to Spamouflage, in what it said at the time was the largest known online covert influence operation in the world.

U.S. WATCH



Jason Bleier carries his dog Sir, a 13-week-old Pembroke Welsh corgi, while walking in the snow at Mt. Diablo State Park on Friday, near Walnut Creek, Calif.

CALIFORNIA
Wintry Chill, Snow Intrude on Spring

Spring took a back seat again Friday as a wintry weather system brought more low-elevation snow, hail, rain and unusually cold temperatures to California.

Cold, unstable air remained in place after a late-season low-pressure system spun into the state a day earlier.

Snow fell to elevations as low as 1,500 feet in parts of Northern California while southern mountain ranges received fresh coatings of white down to 3,000 feet, the National Weather Service said.

Tire chains were required on sections of major Sierra Nevada highways including Interstates 80 and 50 as well as U.S. 395, according to Caltrans.

The chilly blast follows a winter that got off to a slow start and then ramped up with storms in February and March.

—Associated Press

FLORIDA
OSHA Probes Fatal Crane Collapse

Federal job safety officials began their investigation Friday into the collapse of a crane in downtown Fort Lauderdale that killed one worker, injured three people and left morning traffic snarled.

Investigators from the Occupational Safety and Health Administration will try to determine what caused Thursday afternoon's collapse that crushed two cars on a busy bridge that crosses the New River. The bridge reopened after rush hour Friday.

Police identified the killed worker as Jorge De La Torre, 27 years old. Police said he had been working on the building under construction when the collapsing crane caused him to fall. One injured person was hospitalized, while one was released. The third person was treated at the scene.

—Associated Press

NORTH CAROLINA
Small Plane Makes Highway Landing

A small plane experiencing engine problems struck two vehicles as it landed on a highway near a North Carolina airport, but no injuries were reported, authorities said.

The single-engine Lancair 360 with only the pilot on board landed near Raleigh Executive Jetport at Sanford-Lee County Airport in Sanford Thursday after experiencing engine problems, the Federal Aviation Administration said. The FAA will investigate.

The plane was traveling from Lynchburg, Va., to Ocean Isle Beach, N.C., according to FlightAware.

Moncure Fire Department Chief Robert Shi said the plane hit two vehicles as it landed on U.S. Route 1, but only one sustained minor damage, WTVD-TV reported. The pilot wasn't injured, Shi said.

—Associated Press

U.S. Targets Trade 'Loophole' Used for Apparel Shipments

By RICHARD VANDERFORD

The U.S. will crack down on an import method, favored by e-commerce giants such as Temu and Shein, that has allowed cheap clothes from China to flow stateside with no duties and little scrutiny.

De minimis shipments—low value packages often sent directly to U.S. consumers—will receive heightened scrutiny, including for whether goods are being imported in defiance of a U.S. forced-labor ban, the U.S. Department of Homeland Security said Friday.

The move, part of a broader push against illicit apparel imports, comes after U.S. industry groups, unions and lawmakers from both parties have urged a clampdown.

"We are dedicated to ensuring a fair and level playing field for American businesses," said Homeland Security Secretary Alejandro Mayorkas.

The actions announced Friday will include "expanded targeting," laboratory testing and focused enforcement operations, Homeland Security said.

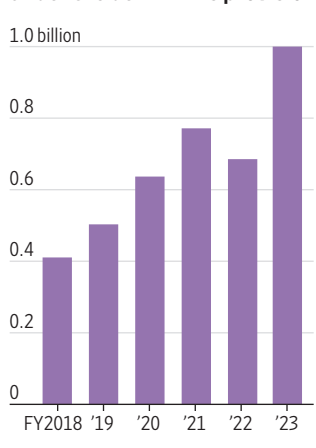
Parcels valued at less than \$800 sent directly from abroad aren't subject to duties and receive little scrutiny from U.S. Customs under the same exemption enjoyed by American travelers returning home with souvenirs.

But the number of those parcels being sent to the U.S. has exploded in recent years.

In 2023, about a billion such packages entered the U.S. that way, mostly from China. Temu and Shein likely accounted for nearly a third of de minimis shipments, according to a report published in 2023 by the House Select Committee on the Chinese Communist Party.

Temu and Shein didn't respond to requests for comment. Temu has said previously that allegations it sells goods made with forced labor are ungrounded and that it doesn't depend on the de minimis provision for its growth. Shein has previously said it has "zero tolerance" for forced labor and that

Shipments entering the U.S. under the de minimis provision



Note: For fiscal years ending Sept. 30
Source: U.S. Customs and Border Protection

the de minimis provision isn't critical to its business success.

Critics have said that because of the absence of duty charges, the de minimis route is effectively a loophole that gives China a de facto free-trade agreement. Some U.S. business groups have countered that the route is legal and helps businesses of all sizes trade without being bogged down in costly red tape.

President Biden in recent months has sought to appeal to trade unions, and his administration framed its plans announced Friday as a way to protect 500,000 U.S. textile workers.

"The textile industry, like other industries, suffers when competitors use forced labor, violate customs laws and engage in other illegal practices to undercut U.S. businesses and drive prices unfairly low," Mayorkas said.

The move could have important implications for U.S. efforts to block imports of goods made with forced labor.

The U.S. has since 2022 banned most imports from China's Xinjiang region, one of the world's major cotton-grow-

ing regions, over concerns that Uyghurs and other minority peoples have been pressed into work. But the de minimis route has been criticized as a way for Chinese shipments to effectively duck that ban by avoiding scrutiny.

Republicans and Democrats alike have increasingly sought action to curb de minimis shipments.

In February, 40 House Democrats urged the administration to take action, saying a "robust enforcement plan" was needed.

Some lawmakers have proposed legislation that would bar China-origin shipments from using the de minimis route altogether.

Rep. Earl Blumenauer, the Oregon Democrat who introduced that bipartisan legislation, said the move to address de minimis shipments is a "small but important step."

"But it does not negate the imperative for Congress to act and close the de minimis loophole for good," he said.

Apart from taking action on the shipment route, Homeland Security will also consider conducting criminal investigations into certain violations, it said, a move that comes after pressure from lawmakers.

The U.S. will make increasing use of customs audits and expand a list of organizations banned from shipping to the U.S. under the Uyghur Forced Labor Prevention Act, the law targeting Xinjiang, Homeland Security said.

The National Council of Textile Organizations, a U.S.-based trade group, hailed the plan.

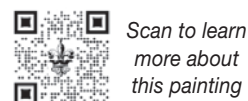
"We value these efforts and the increased public awareness that those who violate trade laws will be held accountable to the maximum extent possible as an effort to deter fraud and uphold the integrity of our critical trade rules," NCTO President Kim Glas said.

POINTILLIST PRECISION
ACHILLE LAUGÉ

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Scan to learn more about this painting

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