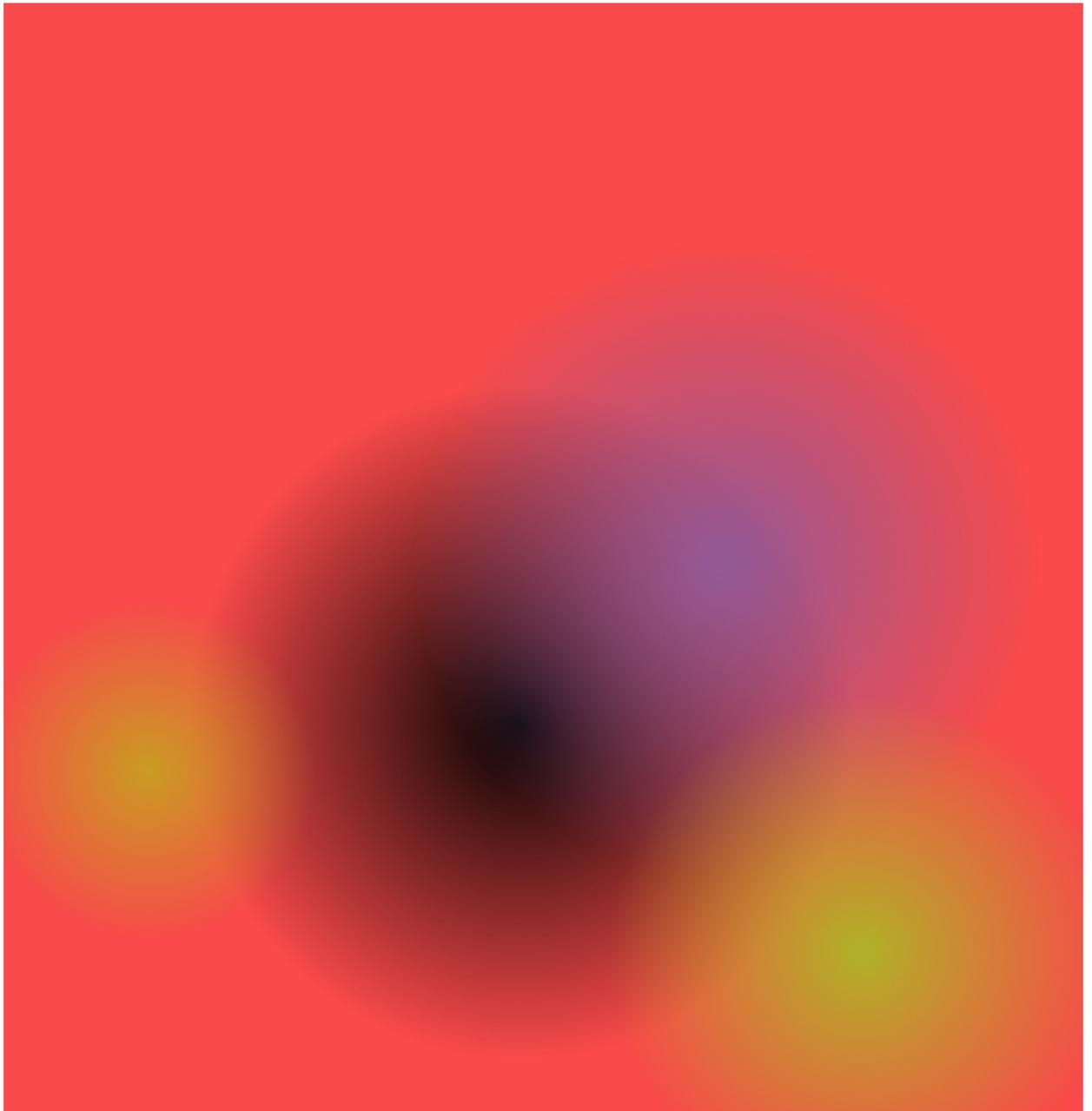


2018 Post-Election Report: Mexico and Colombia

How New Knowledge detected organized groups pushing bias narratives to influence election results



Background

New Knowledge monitored social media content surrounding the 2018 presidential elections in Colombia and Mexico.

Overall we found **nine coordinated networks** artificially amplifying messages in favor or against a candidate or party in Mexico, and **two coordinated networks** in Colombia.

Summary

While some of these networks were difficult to attribute, we traced some back to the responsible person(a)s , and at least two of them show indications of foreign involvement.

2018 Mexico Election

We discovered evidence of nine coordinated information operations on social media in the lead-up to the Mexican presidential election on July 1.

The most persistent of these networks on Twitter over the course of the last five weeks of the election campaign season were the Oaxaca-Triquis botnet, the anti-government botnet, the Nueva Alianza botnet, and the broken IFTTT botnet. The accounts in these four networks demonstrated a very high degree of textual similarity within the network (i.e., automated tweets containing identical or nearly identical content) over long stretches of time. They were the only networks on Twitter to demonstrate a high degree of textual similarity over 10 or more days during the last five weeks of the campaign. (After sending the above network graph to Twitter, the Oaxaca-Triquis network and many accounts in the anti-government botnet were suspended.)

The two Facebook-web networks we uncovered are still active. However, soon after we notified Facebook of our finding, Facebook made a public announcement stating that they were making efforts to limit the number of users exposed to content from disinformation accounts on their platform, in advance of the Mexican election. Following are details of some of the more prominent information operations we observed.

9

Coordinated information operations detected leading up to the Mexican presidential election on July 1

Oaxaca-Triquis Botnet

The Oaxaca-Triquis botnet amplified an antigovernment message regarding the plight of indigenous peoples in the Free and Sovereign State of Oaxaca. All accounts in the botnet were created in April 2018, and the network remained online until Twitter suspended the accounts after the election, after New Knowledge notified twice. At the center of the bot's content is the plight of indigenous peoples in Oaxaca, and their mistreatment and displacement by the PRI-controlled government. The Twitter bots co-opt images and the name of Lorena Merino Martinez, a displaced indigenous woman who is vocal in raising awareness of indigenous oppression in Oaxaca. The bots work in close coordination, and when they are deleted by Twitter, they not only replace the accounts (often simply by adding or moving an underscore in the screen name), but sometimes even tweet at Twitter's main account, accusing them of attempting to silence the Triqui peoples. The criticism is typically of the (PRI-controlled) government in Oaxaca, but it is also connected to anti-PRI, anti-Meade, and pro-Obrador messaging surrounding the 2018 Mexican general election.

The Facebook Networks

We investigated other social media accounts, on different platforms, linking to the same domains as those most distinctive of the Oaxaca-Triquis botnet. Our investigation found two networks of Facebook accounts, which in turn are pushing links and sharing similar content in high volume to a handful of sites, some of which are in common with the Twitter bots. One of them we traced to an individual person(a) with possible ties to the Oaxaca region. The other network appears to be co-opting the image of infamous hacker collective, Anonymous.

Oaxaca-Triquis Bots

A botnet group that New Knowledge detected that worked to amplify an anti-government message surrounding indigenous people in the free sovereign State of Oaxaca on Twitter.

- All accounts were created in April 2018
- Tweets took on the persona of Lorena Merino Martinez, an indigenous activist
- Accounts were suspended by Twitter after the election

These bots are co-opting images and the name of Lorena Merino Martinez, a displaced indigenous woman who is vocal in raising awareness of the issue. They are working in close coordination, and when bots are suspended by Twitter, they not only replace them (often simply by adding or moving an underscore in the screen name), but tweet at Twitter’s main account, accusing them of attempting to silence the Triqui peoples.

While the criticism is typically of the (PRI-controlled) government in the Free and Sovereign State of Oaxaca, the tweets often tag candidates for the Mexican presidency in an attempt to garner a retweet to a larger audience.

At this point, it is difficult to tell the source of the botnet. However, the bots are strongly pushing content from reyesnews.com — a website registered on March 6, 2018, not long before most of these accounts were put online — and sineembargo.mx — an older, pro-AMLO website. It seems that pro-AMLO and/or anti-PRI ideology is behind this botnet.

While most of these bots have low follower counts, there is evidence that their message is reaching a wider audience. Further, ReyesNews — one of the top websites being boosted by this botnet — is regularly pushed by a number of Facebook accounts with very high follower counts, including [larealidadenelmundo](https://www.facebook.com/larealidadenelmundo) (1M+ followers) and [LaRealidadMexico](https://www.facebook.com/LaRealidadMexico) (600k+ followers). There seems to be more here worth investigating as we move closer to the election.

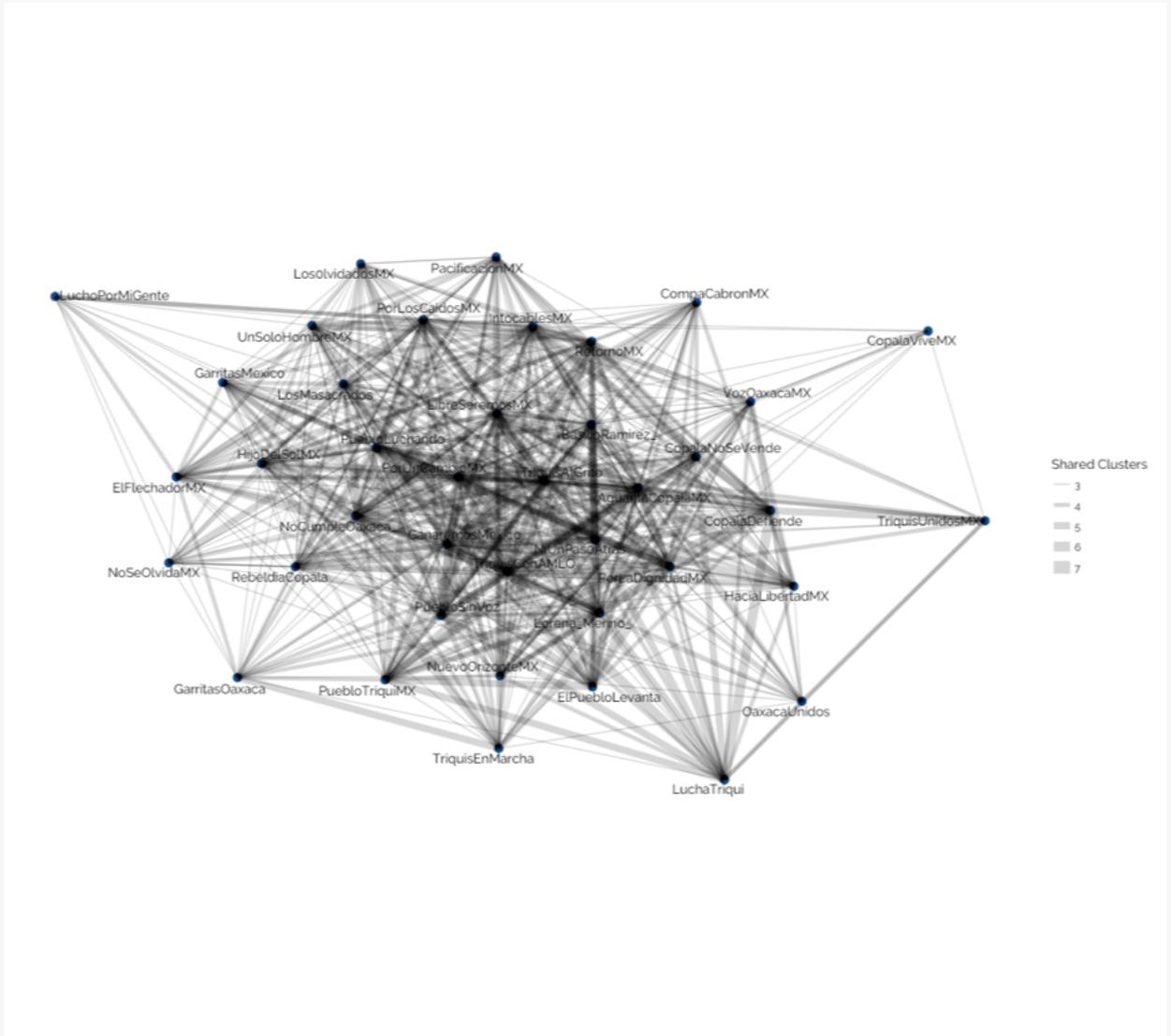


April 30 – May 6, 2018

Mexico Twitter Content: Triquis Network (subset)

User connections based on similarity of post content.

Honing in on this network, we can see the specific accounts involved. Upon identifying these bots, we collected the tweets of all these accounts from the past 20 days, as well as the tweets mentioning or sharing content from these accounts. It turns out these accounts are part of a larger network.



The Bronco Bots

Our monitoring system detected a group of 38 accounts repeatedly pushing identical, or nearly identical, content on Twitter. This content consisted of a small number of unique anti-AMLO, pro-Rodríguez (El Bronco) messages, each tweeted several thousand times from these accounts in the past 48 hours. These tweets were generally published as though the individual behind these bots took some steps to cover his identity, our investigations trace these bots back to a single Facebook profile, belonging to individual who appears to reside in Monterrey, Mexico: Luis J. Garnica (luisgarnica1290). This appears to be a real individual in Mexico.

We found over 5500 messages from the 38 bots in this network before Twitter suspended the accounts (after we notified the platform of their existence). Each of them is a variation of one of two messages as seen below.

Half of these messages parrot a claim from Rodríguez that journalist López Dóriga accepted a large sum of money from the government of Nuevo León (the state of which Monterrey is the capital). The other half push a claim from PRI candidate Meade that Obrador's Morena party has handled 3 billion pesos, and should pay taxes on them like a large business would. The messages generally include a link, and when a link is included, it is always http://9nl.es/22may1_TAMPS.

This URL is a redirect, collecting analytics from users, and then directing them to a Facebook video from the May 20 debate:

This video is hosted by the Facebook page Alta Voz (altavozmx), associated with the website altavz.vom. The website is registered through the Internet Domain Service BS Corp (internet.bs), a Bahamas-based registrar that emphasizes user privacy. (We have previously seen internet.bs as a registrar of IRA-affiliated websites like blackmattersus.com, but we've seen no substantial links between these Bronco Bots and Russian influence operations.)

Though the domain and the Twitter bots are not publicly associated with a name, the Facebook page for Alta Voz is administered by Luis J. Garnica (luisgarnica1290).

As far as we can tell, this individual is based in Monterrey. His stated place of work, the stated location and phone number for Alta Voz, and even the location of a large number of his (publicly listed) Facebook friends are all located in Monterrey. He also tagged some of the Twitter accounts as being located in Monterrey.

This was not a particularly dangerous set of Twitter bots. They engaged in activity that is easily detected, and as a result were suspended before gaining traction with "real" users.

Caso Anaya

Ricardo Anaya's presidential campaign was riddled with accusations of financial fraud. In May, an investigation into possible money laundering by Anaya and Manuel Barreiro was dropped due to lack of evidence.

But less than one month before the election, a series of videos were released on the newly registered website casoanaya.com, purporting to show a scheme between Anaya and Juan Barreiro (brother of Manuel) that would be advantageous to the two of them and their businesses, should Anaya be elected.

While this scandal had been covered in the Mexican news media, New Knowledge uncovered evidence of an artificial, and possibly coordinated, campaign to boost this message on social media on June 13, the day immediately following the last presidential debate (June 12). The operator(s) of the participating accounts on Twitter presented themselves as supporters of PRI candidate Meade. This would be consistent with claims from the Anaya campaign that the PRI is behind the campaign. However, further analysis showed that supporters of frontrunner Obrador also shared the videos. These Obrador supporters include Facebook pages previously identified by New Knowledge as being involved in the inorganic boosting of pro-Obrador and/or anti-PRI messaging (see above).

Both the Caso Anaya YouTube channel and the website casoanaya.com were created on June 7, 2018. Despite their recency, the videos shared on casoanaya.com and the YouTube channel have already been seen by over two million viewers. Because of the topic and its timeliness, these videos received significant attention in both the news media and social media. In fact, according to our Facebook analytics, content from these sites appeared in the feeds of tens of millions of Facebook users. However, our analysis discovered that the social media attention was not entirely organic.

Our analysis of Twitter content from June 12–19 flagged a number of URLs with suspicious sharing patterns. 3 of the top 15 URLs surfaced by our model for that week came from casoanaya.com. Of the tweets we collected that contained links to Caso Anaya videos, 96% of them were shared on June 13, 2018, the day after the debate. These shares came from a total of 173 unique accounts in our collection database, some posting links to one or more of these videos as many as 25 times.

The top hashtags included in these tweets are [#meadepresidente](#), [#yoconmeade](#), [#nuevaalianza](#), and [#votanuevaalianza](#), after which there is a significant drop off in frequency. These hashtags suggest that the accounts sharing these videos are pro-Meade.

Caso Anaya Continued

However, our analysis of the Facebook content— where share volume and user interactions are significantly higher — found that the bulk of the Facebook pages and groups sharing these links are pro-Obrador.

It is our assessment that these networks are not coordinated with each other, especially given the anti-PRI messaging coming out of some of the Facebook pages. Rather, there is likely a pro-Meade network of Twitter accounts pushing the Caso Anaya message, and separate networks of pro-Obrador accounts on Facebook (among other networks not mentioned in these reports), and they each make use of any existing messages that suit their interests. There did seem to be an acceleration of attempts to artificially amplify messages critical of specific candidates in the final weeks of the election campaigns, including this artificially amplified attack on Anaya.

Colombia

We discovered two coordinated information operations on social media in the lead-up to the Colombian presidential election on May 27 and the run-off election on June 17.

- The pro-Vargas-Lleras botnet (Twitter, pro-Vargas-Lleras)
- The international, Spanish language, anti-government botnet (Twitter)

The pro-Vargas-Lleras botnet was a short-lived, half-hearted attempt in the latter days of the election to boost the message of embattled candidate, Germán Vargas-Lleras. It was quickly removed from the platform.

The second network is an international, predominately Spanish-language, antigovernment botnet on Twitter. We discovered this network on June 4, approximately two weeks prior to the run-off. At that point, those accounts were generally between a few days and a few weeks old, and were primarily pushing anti-government messages for Venezuela, Colombia, and Nicaragua, with links to content on YouTube and two recently created websites. (Mexico-related content appeared in late June, as that election approached, and Catalonia-related messaging appeared occasionally, as well.)

The account profiles are all variations on a theme, and locations given in the account profiles appear to be fake (in some cases, they simply do not exist).

Though these accounts claim to be different individuals in different countries, the content posted to these accounts is often identical, and always fast-paced and high-volume.

In addition to anti-government messaging in Venezuela and Nicaragua, these accounts were actively attempting to link Colombian presidential candidate, Gustavo Petro, to the FARC terrorist organization. FARC and Colombia were at war until an unpopular peace deal was signed in 2016. Petro's support for the peace deal and his leftist politics have left him open to characterizations of being a communist or a terrorist, which this botnet has seized upon.

While most posts from this botnet are in Spanish, a few English tweets slide through now and then. These include links to tech tutorials and the site christiandiscourse.net — with posts usually focusing on sensitive social issues in the US, and even occasionally Twitter automation and analytic tools.

The screenshot shows three tweets from accounts identified as part of a botnet. Each tweet includes a profile picture, a name, a handle, and a 'Follow' button. The first tweet is from 'Sinceridad Política' (@SinceridadPolit) and contains text about Gustavo Petro and a video of a man with a blindfold. The second tweet is from 'SraDeLasFlores' (@SraDeLasFlores) and contains text about Ivan Márquez and a video of a man with a rifle. The third tweet is from 'Yo Queipa' (@YoQueipa) and contains text about Gustavo Petro and a video of a building.

Outcome

We have reported our findings periodically to Twitter and Facebook, and at least three networks were suspended from the platforms as a likely result of our reporting before they were able to reach a significant audience.

The Twitter botnets we've uncovered (as opposed to the Facebook networks) are young. And while some of them have generated content that has been shared outside the immediate botnet rather quickly, the reach is still fairly small. However the Facebook networks seems to have been active for some time, and through them, the content has already reached a large number of potential voters.

April 30 – May 6, 2018

Mexico Twitter Content: High-Persistence/High-Density Network (known news bots removed)

User connections based on similarity of post content.

Accounts that tweet highly similar content across multiple days are connected, and “cliques” emerge within that network – groups of accounts that are similar across the clique, but different from other accounts or groups of accounts. The Triquis botnet can be seen as the large, dark cluster of accounts near the center of the graph below.

For example, one article about AMLO on reyesnews.com (a very young site amplified by the Oaxaca-Triquis botnet and the “Anonymous” Facebook network) found its way via a small number of Facebook pages into the news feeds of 1.4M users, and garnered almost 22,000 interactions. That included 3,425 shares – which put the content into the news feeds of more Facebook users.

It's not clear how many of those followers of these pages are real or fake. But these are not numbers to take lightly.

