Graphika

Posing as Patriots

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Suspected Russian Actors to Covertly
Target Far-Right U.S. Audiences on
Alternative Platforms

The Graphika Team

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Executive Summary

Actors linked to previous Russian information operations continue to target American far-right communities with inflammatory and politically-divisive messaging, leveraging alternative online platforms such as patriots[.]win, Gab and Parler. The newly-discovered campaign began on Nov. 5 last year, is still active, and builds on previous foreign influence efforts likely conducted by the same actors that Graphika exposed ahead of the 2020 U.S. presidential election.

Narratives have included false allegations of voter fraud, amplification of tensions over racial inequality and police violence, criticism of the U.S. government's response to Covid-19, racist attacks on Vice President Kamala Harris, and accusations of senility and pedophilia directed at President Joe Biden. The actors also disseminated a series of political cartoons, which appear to be unique and may have been created specifically for this campaign.

Graphika assesses with a medium degree of confidence that this activity was conducted by the same actors as the "Newsroom for American and European Based Citizens" (NAEBC). This assessment is based on identified connections between a set of newly-discovered accounts on patriots[.]win and previously-identified NAEBC assets on Gab and Parler. Those connections include both sets of accounts repeatedly posting the same unique content within minutes and sometimes seconds of each other. While content sharing on its own never amounts to a strong attribution signal, in this case both sets of accounts alternated as the original posters, suggesting the activity is unlikely to be the work of two independent actors with one copying the other.

NAEBC was a fake right-wing media outlet publicly exposed by Graphika and Reuters in October as part of a covert Russian influence operation targeting U.S. voters ahead of the presidential election. The actors behind the campaign succeeded in hiring freelance authors to produce content, and also ran a fake left-wing outlet called Peace Data to target both sides of the political debate. The operation has been attributed to people associated with past activity of the Internet Research Agency (IRA)[1], a Russian "troll farm" and political influence effort that former employees,

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[1] Also known as "Lakhta Internet Research" (LIR). U.S. Office of the Director of National Intelligence, (March 2021), *Foreign Threats to the 2020 US Federal Elections*

investigative [reports](#) by Russian journalists, and [U.S. prosecutors](#) say is orchestrated by financier Yevgeny Prigozhin.

The newly-identified activity discussed in this report shows that suspected Russian actors retooled and doubled down on efforts to target far-right American audiences after their previous activities were disrupted ahead of the 2020 U.S. election. The actors' continued presence on alternative platforms that lack rigorous policies on foreign interference has also allowed them to create a direct line to these communities, through which to deliver a stream of tailor-made political content. The sometimes skeptical reaction they received, however, and a failure to achieve significant traction illustrates the operators' long-standing struggle with content quality and authenticity.

Our report details the following key findings:

- Graphika has identified a sustained effort to target far-right communities on alternative online platforms. The campaign is most active on patriots[.]win (a discussion forum [previously](#) [hosted](#) on Reddit as r/The_Donald and then independently at thedonald[.]win), where it utilizes a set of 20 inauthentic accounts as messaging vectors and amplifiers. All but one of the accounts were created in a three-hour window on Nov. 5, two days after the U.S. election.

- The actors also use accounts on Gab and Parler that were an active part of the earlier NAEBC operation. On multiple occasions, these assets have posted the same unique content as the newly-discovered accounts, usually closely after but sometimes before it appeared on patriots[.]win. In one instance, the same photo of a political stunt in New York was posted to patriots[.]win and Gab within 26 seconds.

- The campaign made a concerted effort to disseminate a series of political cartoons which Graphika was not able to identify elsewhere online. This suggests they could be original content created or commissioned directly by the actors. At least one of the cartoons repurposed an image used by Russian actors to target the 2016 U.S. election.

- The actors have achieved some traction on patriots[.]win and Gab, with 11 posts gathering more than 100 comments and interactions from authentic users. But any efforts to seed content in the wider right-wing community seem to have failed. Graphika was only able to identify four instances of content being organically shared on other platforms, none of which had any success.

- Despite media concerns about covert Russian efforts to instigate and exacerbate riots at the U.S. Capitol, the identified accounts only mentioned the events of Jan. 6 once in a post that received almost no traction online. Additionally, the patriots[.]win operation made no explicit references to QAnon beyond general allegations of child sexual abuse targeted at Biden and support for Congresswoman Marjorie Taylor Greene.

The Set

The activity set discussed in this report consists of 20 accounts on patriots[.]win, five accounts on Gab, and five accounts on Parler. Based on the behavioral indicators outlined below, Graphika believes all the accounts are inauthentic and likely operated by the same actors.
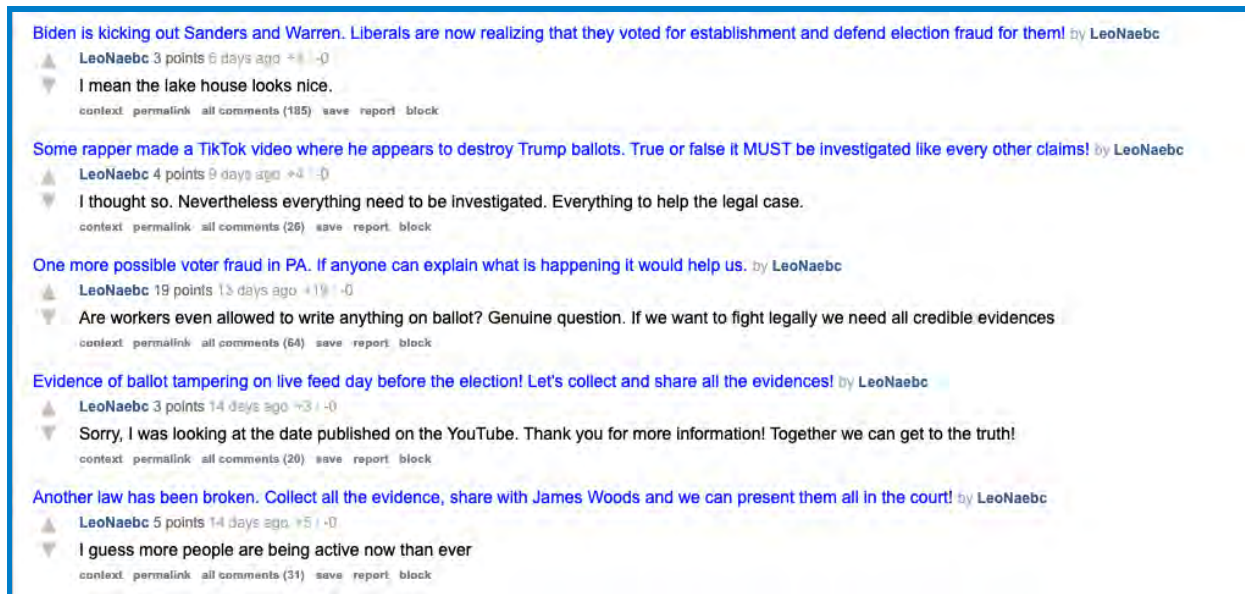
Patriots[.]win

The earliest asset identified on patriots[.]win used a persona that previously posed as a staff member at NAEBC -- LeoNaebc. The account was created on Sept. 10, 2020 (which follows a spike in NAEBC account creations on Gab and Parler during the week of Aug. 23, 2020) and has since been deleted by the user. Its last recorded activity was on Dec. 4.

Despite this, some of LeoNaebc's activity is still visible in archived copies of thedonald[.]win, which moved to patriots[.]win in late January. These cached pages provide limited information, including titles of posts made by the account and some of its comments. Nevertheless, they show that LeoNaebc was particularly active between Nov. 5 - 12 when they posted multiple times about allegations of voter fraud in the U.S. presidential election. One post in that period was titled "Evidence of ballot tampering on live feed day before the election! Let's collect and share all the evidences!" Another told forum users: "One more possible voter fraud in PA. If anyone can explain what is happening it would help us."
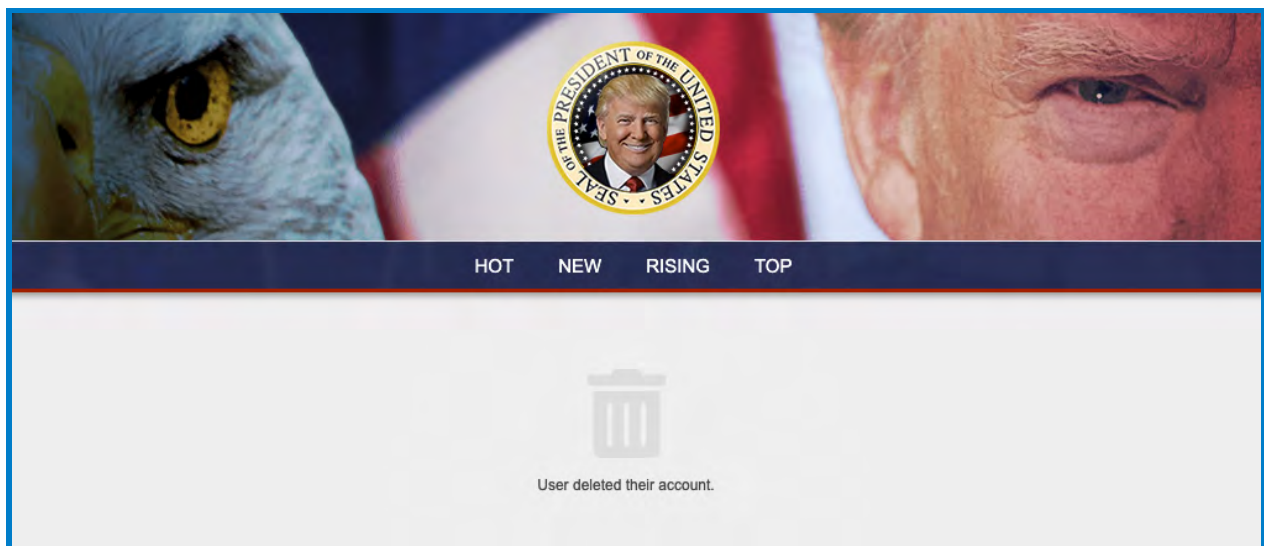
Profile page for patriots[.]win user LeoNaebc which says the account was deleted by its owner

*Posts and comments by the now-deleted LeoNaebc user on thedonald[.]win between Nov. 5-12*

The remaining 19 patriots[.]win accounts were all created in a three hour window between 12:10-15:10 GMT on Nov. 5, 2020. Often the creation timestamps are within minutes of each other, and many of the accounts have similarly-themed names referencing child sexual abuse allegations against Biden. Others explicitly support former President Donald Trump, or play on long-standing racist tropes and memes, such as "We Wuz Kangs," "prepare to be culturally enriched," and the "rapefugee" conspiracy theory.

All but two of the Nov. 5 accounts are amplifiers that almost exclusively comment on posts by other assets in the set, allowing Graphika to first identify and then map out the network. Many of these comments are only tangentially-related to the content of the posts and push generic racist, antisemitic, and homophobic narratives. Some, however, take specific aim at Biden and Harris, denouncing them as "rats," "snakes," and "traitors." Parts of the activity are puerile nonsense and one account has only ever commented with variations of the phrase "Biden sucks cocks."

The last two accounts on patriots[.]win are the main messaging vectors for the campaign and display behavioral characteristics not typically associated with organic social media activity, such as only posting between 12:00 - 18:00 GMT. The first of these two accounts became active on Dec. 9 and began regularly sharing articles and tweets from right-wing sources. Despite posting almost daily throughout December, however, there was no activity recorded between Dec. 30 - Jan. 26. This is the only period during which no account in the network posted for more than a week and closely tracks with Russia's national New Year holidays in January, when most people take extended time off work.

On March 10 there appears to have been a "handover" to the second messaging account, which began sharing a stream of right-wing political cartoons while the first account largely stopped posting. Graphika has not been able to identify the cartoons being shared online prior to this

campaign, suggesting they could be original content created or commissioned directly by the actors. A full content analysis follows in the second half of this report.
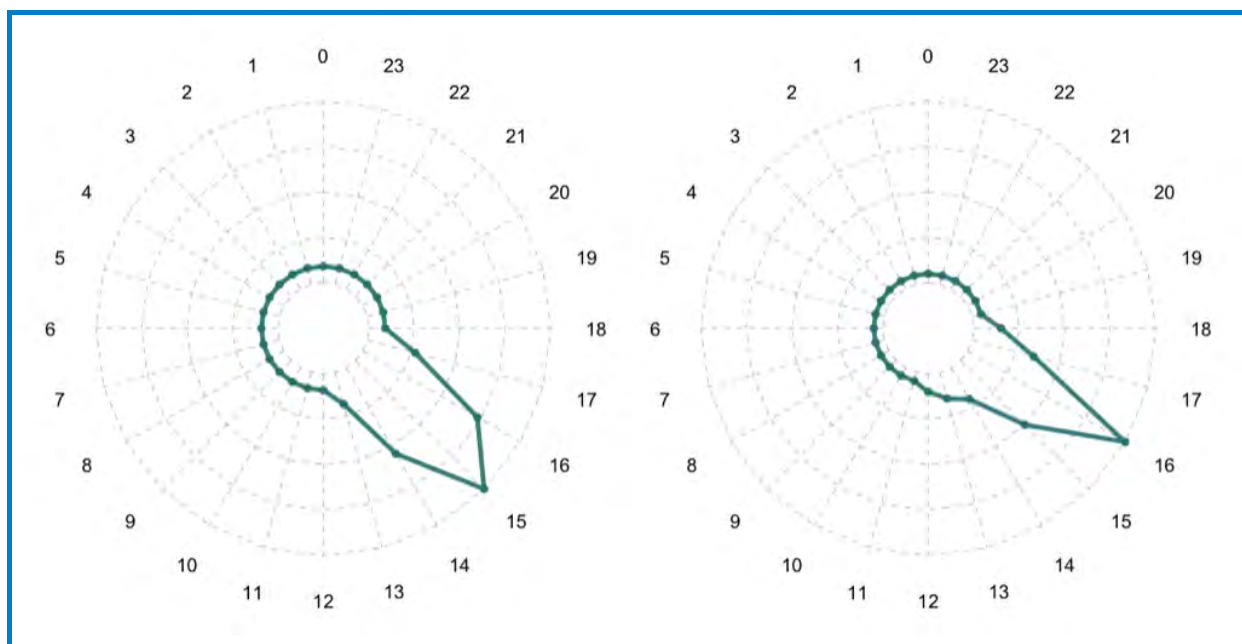
Posting times for the two main messaging accounts on patriots[.]win, showing the operators observing a regular pattern between 12:00 - 18:00 GMT
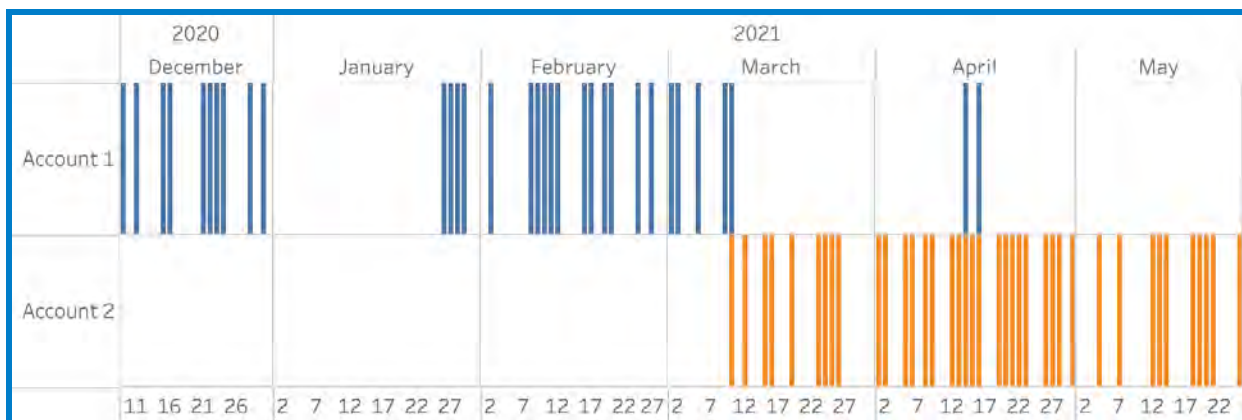
Posting dates for the two main messaging accounts on patriots[.]win, showing no activity between Dec. 30 - Jan. 26 and the "handover" in early March

While the language in the cartoons is usually grammatically correct, the titles of posts created by the account are littered with mistakes. Some of these are basic misspellings but others are grammatical errors typical of native Russian speakers, such as incorrect use of the definite and indefinite articles. One cartoon posted on March 24, for example, depicts Biden stumbling as he disembarks Air Force One. The post has the title: "Senile Joe - an (*sic*) usurper and quite literally a (*sic*) walking dead." Another image posted on April 16 references the Gadsden flag but has the misspelled and grammatically incorrect caption: "Don't Thread (*sic*) On Me is not an (*sic*) advice."

On some occasions the language mistakes were noticed by other users on patriots[.]win who then joked about the account being a Russian-controlled asset. One post on April 2 showed a cartoon depiction of Biden and his son Hunter as members of "The American Royal family" with the title: "What Americans is (*sic*) good at? Among many thing (*sic*) is fighting against monarchs and despots." Forum users replied highlighting the grammar mistakes before other accounts in the set commented to defend the poster.


Users on patriots[.]win joking about the account's possible Russian origins under a cartoon with the grammatically incorrect caption "Biden is an embarrassment of America." (Watermark added by Graphika)

Gab and Parler

The 10 accounts on Gab and Parler are all assets that Graphika first identified as part of the NAEBC operation in October last year. The accounts presented themselves as staff and editors working at the fake media outlet in order to post articles from its website and solicit contributions from freelance writers. Following their exposure, the accounts have removed nearly all references to NAEBC from their profiles but remain active online and continue to share content from right-wing media outlets and personalities.

Starting from March 10, however, these NAEBC-linked accounts have engaged in a concerted effort to disseminate content that was also posted by the newly-discovered assets active on patriots[.]win. This has mostly taken place on Gab and focused on a series of political cartoons. In late April, one of the NAEBC personas even updated the descriptions on their Gab and Parler accounts to explicitly reference their role distributing the images.
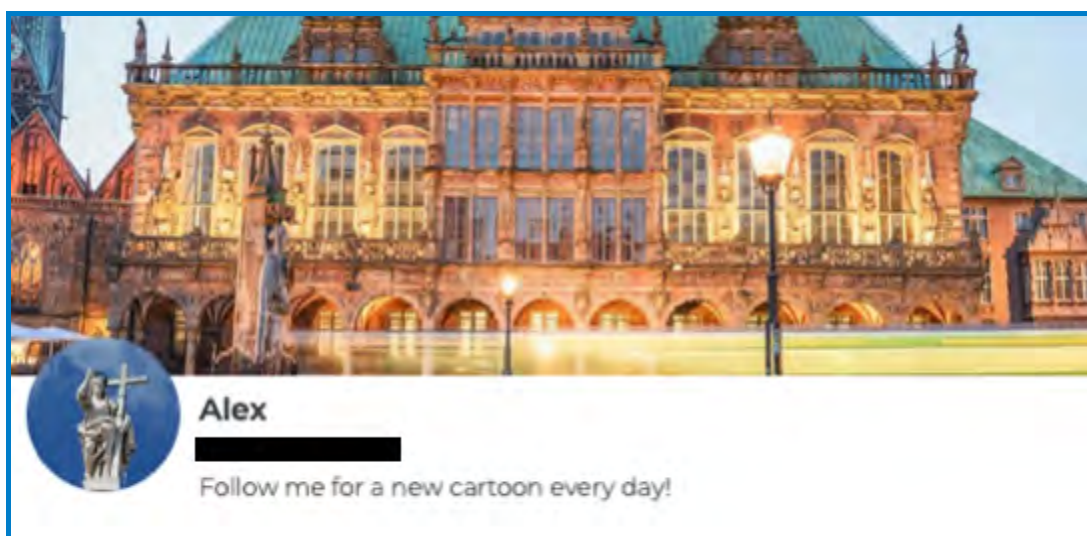
An NAEBC-linked account on Parler that updated its bio in late April. Previously, its bio read: "Conservative | Pro-Life | Writer | Activist | Political Commentator"

On 16 occasions in March and April, the same cartoons were posted by both the NAEBC accounts on Gab and the accounts on patriots[.]win. On 14 of those occasions, the images appeared on patriots[.]win before then being shared to Gab, usually within the space of an hour but sometimes with a delay of a day or more. The remaining two cartoons were first shared on Gab followed by posts on patriots[.]win, showing that the NAEBC accounts are not simply copying the content from an independent source.

While cross-posting unique political memes could be a coincidence, a flurry of activity on April 14 provided further indications that both sets of accounts could be operated by the same users. Between 15:50 - 16:21 GMT one of the messaging accounts on patriots[.]win and two of the NAEBC personas on Gab alternately posted the same set of photos in rapid succession, showing

a man on Times Square in New York City handing out rolls of toilet paper printed with Biden's face. The photos all show the same incident from different angles and were shared to both Gab and patriots[.]win within minutes of each. At one point, the exact same photo was shared to both Gab and patriots[.]win just 26 seconds apart. As with the meme images, Graphika has not been able to identify the photos being shared elsewhere online.

Content Analysis

Toilet Paper on Times Square

The pictures described above form some of the most intriguing content shared during the campaign. The set of six photos document an incident outside the ABC and ESPN studios in Times Square, where rolls of toilet paper printed with Biden's face were arranged on a portable table and a man in a blue-checked shirt handed them out to passersby.

By examining news headlines on a ticker tape shown in the photos, as well as the composition of shadows in the images, Graphika has determined that the pictures were taken between 16:22 local time and sunset on April 8 at or near this location. Additionally, one of the individuals shown receiving a toilet roll is a street performer known to frequent Times Square, and independent Instagram posts from April 8 show the same man in a blue-checked shirt in the same position.

Four of the photos showing the incident in Times Square, New York City

The images were all shared in rapid succession on April 14 (six days after they were taken) by one of the main messaging accounts on patriots[.]win and two NAEBC personas on Gab. All of the accounts characterised the incident as an organic occurrence and the work of "patriots." The first post to patriots[.]win was titled "Just a simple man doing simple work distributing Joe Biden toilet paper" and included the comment "Real Patriots wipe with Joe Biden TP." Another post instructed followers to "Hit share if you would wipe your ass with Biden's face!"

Graphika was not able to identify the photos being shared elsewhere online or find any news stories, independent posts or other reporting about the incident, suggesting the photos could be original content created or commissioned by the actors. This tactic would be consistent with previous activity conducted by the Internet Research Agency (IRA). In 2015, for example, the IRA reportedly used the promise of free hotdogs to attract visitors to a public square in New York. And in 2016, U.S. prosecutors say IRA employees arranged for a U.S. citizen to stand in front of the White House with a sign reading "Happy 55th Birthday Dear Boss" two days before Yevgeny Prigozhin's birthday.
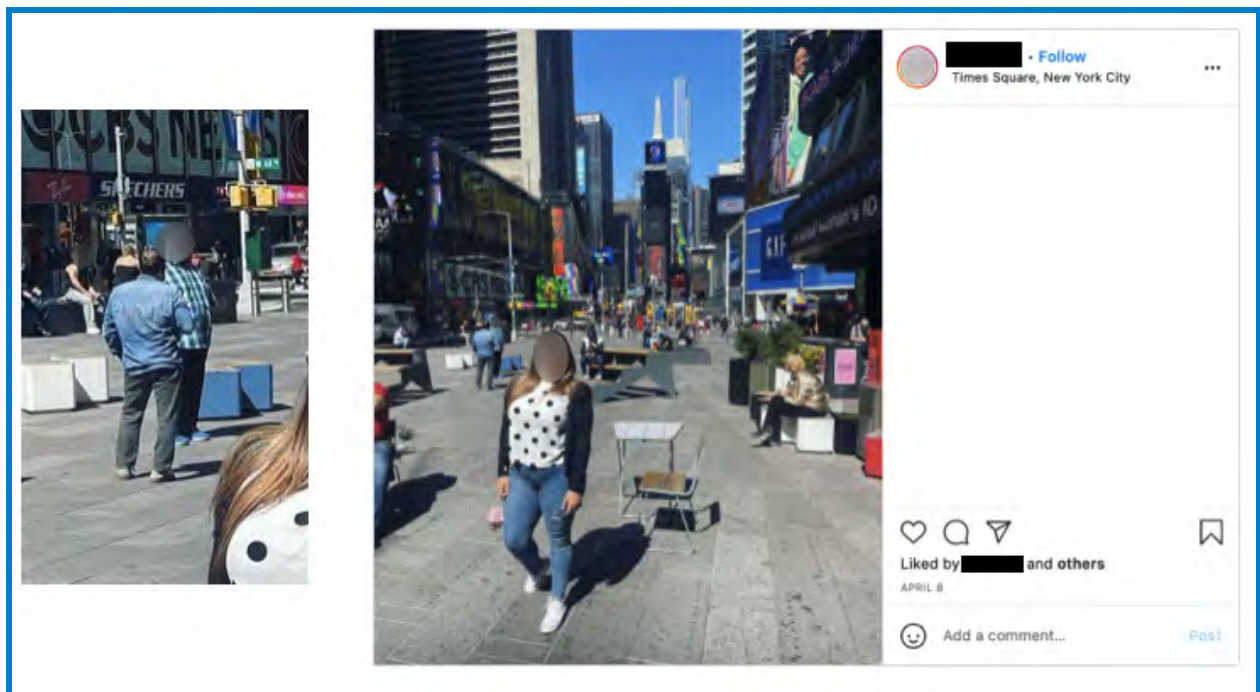
A photo posted to Instagram on April 8 shows the same man in a blue-checked shirt in the same position in Times Square

Memelords

The accounts in the set on Gab, Parler and patriots[.]win have all engaged in a concerted and coordinated effort to disseminate a series of political cartoons among right-wing audiences since early March. Graphika has so far counted 47 unique images, with new cartoons being posted every few days.

The narratives in the cartoons are brazen and frequently highly offensive. Many take aim at Biden and Harris personally, amplifying racist tropes alongside allegations of senility, sexual harassment, and pedophilia. Others target sensitive social and political issues in the United States, such as racial inequality, immigration, gun control and the government's response to Covid-19.

While the messaging is not particularly sophisticated, the cartoons themselves are often highly detailed and closely track with U.S. politics and news events. An image criticizing the conviction of former police officer Derek Chauvin for the murder of George Floyd was posted just one day after the trial jury returned its guilty verdict.

A cartoon image posted to patriots[.]win on April 21 criticizing the murder conviction of Derek Chauvin

A cartoon posted to patriots[.]win on May 20 referencing conspiracy theories about the Covid-19 vaccine

Graphika believes the images may be original content created or commissioned directly by the actors. Speaking to this, the patriots[.]win account that posted all but one of the cartoons commented on their own post on March 24 to say: "Please let me know if you have any ideas for future pics." This is similar to older posts by the NAEBC personas on Gab and Parler, who have previously asked for suggestions for articles and solicited contributions from freelance writers.

The account on patriots[.]win soliciting ideas for future cartoons

The only other indication of authorship is an artist signature - "Schmitz" - that has appeared on 21 of the cartoons since April 15. One of the NAEBC personas has also used the hashtag #Schmitz when posting signed cartoons on Gab and Parler. The signature was not included on any of the previous images and, at the time of writing, Graphika had not been able to identify an artist using that name or other examples of their work. It is not clear if Schmitz is a real artist whose work has been reappropriated, a real artist commissioned by the actors, or a fictitious persona.
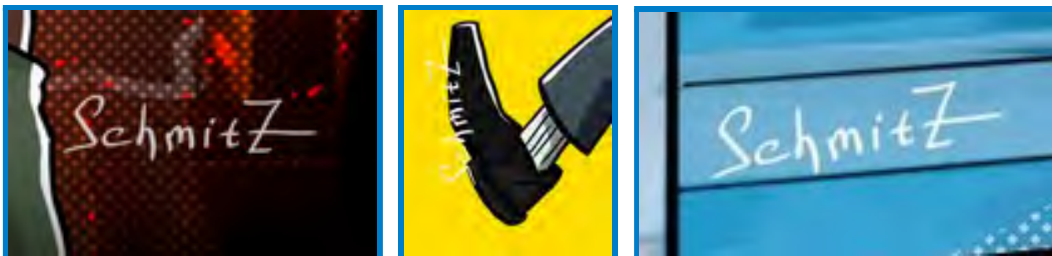
Examples of the "Schmitz" signature that has appeared on the cartoons since April 15

All of the images appear to have been created using basic photo-editing techniques, such as over-laying photographs with a "hand drawn" filter and recycling visual elements from memes and photos available online. In one case, Graphika identified the source material for an image in the set as an illustration of Jesus Christ arm wrestling with the devil, which was also used by IRA actors as part of their attempts to influence the 2016 U.S. presidential election.
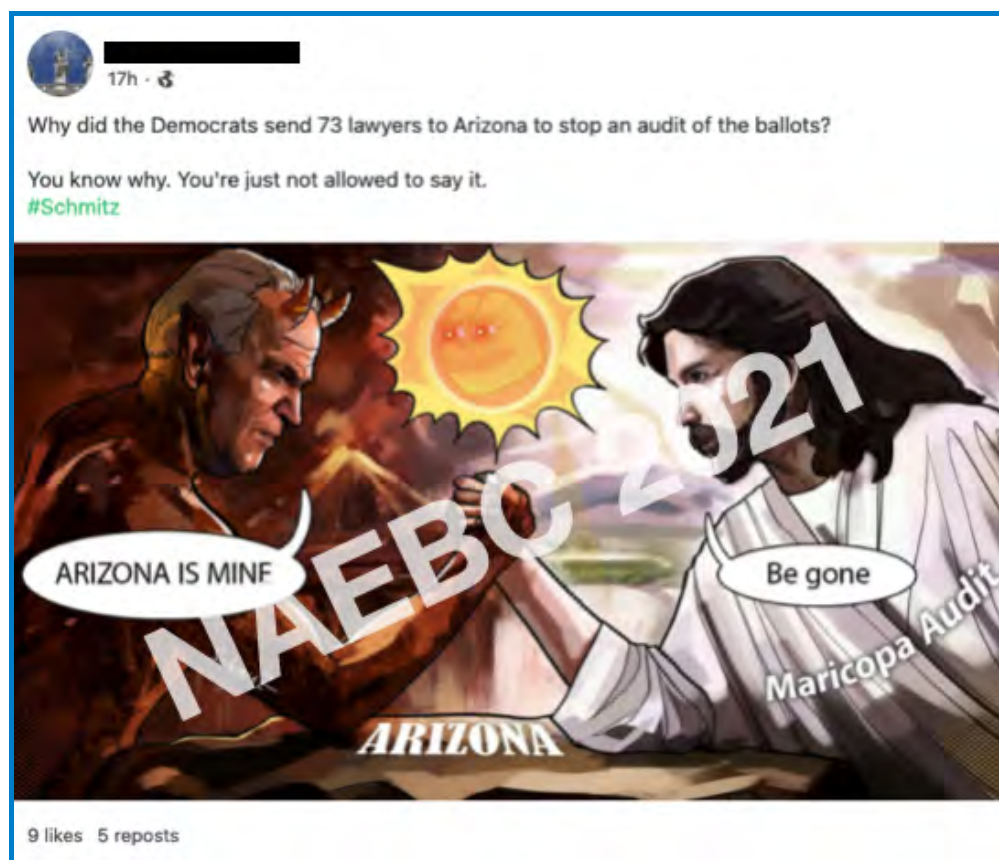
A political cartoon shared by an NAEBC-linked account on Gab with the hashtag #Schmitz that repurposed a meme image used by the IRA in 2016

A [Facebook advertisement](#) used by IRA actors as part of their foreign influence efforts targeting the 2016 U.S. presidential election

If the actors' intention was to seed these cartoons in right-wing communities then the effort seems to largely have failed. Graphika only found four instances of images in the set being shared beyond the original posts on patriots[.]win, Gab and Parler.

One cartoon showing Harris in medical scrubs preparing to push a wheelchair-bound Biden off a cliff was shared to Reddit on March 15 by a user who has since deleted the post and is almost certainly unrelated to the operation. And on April 19, a Twitter account posted an image depicting

Marjorie Taylor Greene as a Star Wars hero facing off against an "insurrectionist" Maxine Waters 19 times in replies to other users. Despite the unusually high number of posts, this account also appears to be unconnected to the campaign and regularly replies to other Twitter users with an array of right-wing memes posted in rapid succession.

Lastly, in late May, two of the memes were posted in online discussion forums catering to custom car enthusiasts. On both of those occasions, the image file names show they were sourced from patriots[.]win, and the posting accounts had previously shared large amounts of unrelated media content from the far-right discussion forum. Both posters were also old accounts dating from 2005 and 2011, suggesting they are unlikely to be controlled by the same actors.

An image from the set posted to Reddit on March 15 by a seemingly unrelated user

Fraud, Stonks & Russian Philosophy

In addition to the memes and Times Square photos, accounts in the set also posted a steady stream of content copied from external sources to patriots[.]win from early December to mid-March. Many of the posts were links to articles by established right-wing media outlets such as Breitbart. Others were simply screenshots of social media posts by conservative politicians and media personalities. All of the content amplified existing right-wing narratives and was tailored to a highly-politicized audience. Below are details of some of the most notable posts.

Capitol Riots: On Dec. 30, one of the main messaging accounts on patriots[.]win shared a link to a Breitbart article which quoted Republican Senator Josh Hawley as saying he would object to the 2020 Electoral College vote on Jan. 6. The account then commented on the post to say: "Not only Congressmen will join us on that day. Senators too. January 6th will be our Now or Never moment."

This appears to be an explicit call for forum users to attend planned protests at the U.S. Capitol on Jan. 6. It is important to note, however, that this was the only time the patriots[.]win network referenced the Capitol riots, and the account was inactive from Dec. 30 - Jan. 26. The post received no additional comments and only 164 "upvotes."
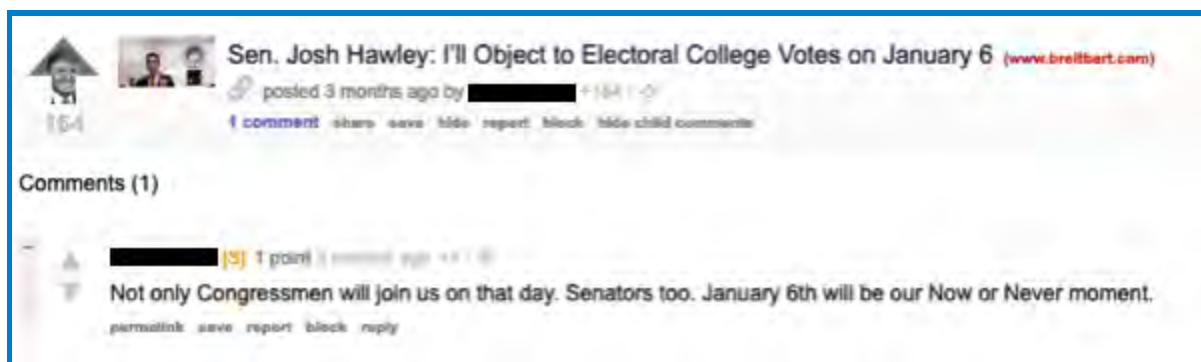
Dec. 30 post and comment on patriots[.] win referencing planned protests at the U.S. Capitol on Jan. 6

Election Fraud: Multiple posts promoted allegations of electoral fraud in the U.S. presidential election, drawing on articles and meme images previously shared by accounts in the "Stop the Steal" movement.

A March 10 post on patriots[.]win with a grammatically incorrect title

Marjorie Taylor Greene: Accounts in the set repeatedly championed Republican Congresswoman Marjorie Taylor Greene as a straight-talking politician who represents the best interests of true Americans. On two separate occasions, the accounts have posted screenshots of tweets by Taylor Greene to patriots[.]win, one of which called for Biden to be impeached. And on April 19, accounts on patriots[.]win and Gab shared a cartoon depicting her as a Star Wars hero protecting police officers from rioting Black Lives Matter protesters and "insurrectionist" Democrats.

Posts to patriots[.]win on Feb. 17 (left) and March 5 (right) sharing screenshots of tweets by Marjorie Taylor Greene

Cartoon posted to patriots[.]win on April 19

GameStop: On Jan. 28 and 29, the accounts shared two posts in response to a decision by online trading platform RobinHood to suspend trading of GameStop shares following a coordinated online campaign to inflate the value of the stock. The patriots[.]win accounts attempted to connect the decision to allegations of electoral fraud and narratives that undermine the legitimacy of Biden's victory.

Post to patriots[.]win on Jan. 28

Russian Philosophy: On Jan. 26, one of the main messaging accounts on patriots[.]win shared a post titled "You are here" with a picture of Soviet dissident writer Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn. Beneath the picture is a quote attributed to Solzhenitsyn that is actually a variation of a passage from *A Mountain of Crumbs* by Elena Gorokhova, a book about her experiences growing up in the Soviet Union.

This was the account's first post since Dec. 30 and could be interpreted as a reflection on its own activities. The original quote reads: "The rules are simple: They lie to us, we know they're lying, they know we know they're lying, but they keep lying anyway, and we keep pretending to believe them."

Post to patriots[.]win on Jan. 26