

Facebook and Twitter shutter pro-Trump network reaching 55 million accounts

On Friday, Facebook and Twitter shut down a network of fake accounts that pushed pro-Trump messages all while “masquerading” as Americans with AI-generated faces as profile photos.

In a blog post, Facebook said that it connected the accounts to a US-based media company called The BL that, it claims, has ties to Epoch Media Group. In August, NBC News first reported that Epoch Media Group was pushing messages in support of President Donald Trump across social media platforms like Facebook and Twitter. Epoch has extensive connections to Falun Gong, an eccentric Chinese spiritual community that has faced significant persecution from the country’s central government.

While the Epoch Times denied any connection to The BL in a statement to *The Verge*, Facebook begs to differ: “With all due respect to the publisher of the Epoch Times, he may not know executives at The BL were active admins on Epoch Media Group Pages as recently as this morning when their accounts were deactivated and the BL was removed,” a Facebook spokesperson tells us.

“The BL is now banned from Facebook”

Facebook noted that many of the fake accounts used in the latest campaign employed false profile photos that appeared to have been generated by artificial intelligence. Those accounts would post BL content in other Facebook groups while pretending to be Americans. Pro-Trump messages were often posted “at very high frequencies” and linked to off-platform

sites belonging to the BL and *The Epoch Times*. The accounts and pages were managed by individuals in the US and Vietnam.

Facebook said that it removed 610 accounts, 89 Facebook pages, 156 groups, and 72 Instagram accounts that were connected to the organization. Around 55 million accounts followed one of these Facebook pages and 92,000 followed at least one of the Instagram accounts. The organization spent nearly \$9.5 million in advertisements, according to Facebook.

"The BL is now banned from Facebook," Nathaniel Gleicher, Facebook's head of security policy, said in a statement. "We are continuing to investigate all linked networks, and will take action as appropriate if we determine they are engaged in deceptive behavior."

Update, December 20th at 3:51 PM ET: Updated to include that *The Epoch Times* denies any connection to The BL, and clarified that it is Facebook which is alleging that based on its own internal investigation.

Update, December 20th at 8:10 PM ET: Added additional comment from a Facebook spokesperson.

<https://www.theverge.com/2019/12/20/21031823/facebook-twitter-trump-network-epoch-times-inauthentic-behavior>