DETAILED REPORT

# October 2021 Coordinated Inauthentic Behavior Report

∞ Meta

We're constantly working to find and stop coordinated campaigns that seek to manipulate public debate across our apps.

## PURPOSE OF THIS REPORT

Over the past four years, we've shared our findings about [coordinated inauthentic behavior](#) we detect and remove from our platforms. As part of our regular CIB reports, we're sharing information about all networks we take down over the course of a month to make it easier for people to see the progress we're making in one place.

## WHAT IS CIB?

We view CIB as coordinated efforts to manipulate public debate for a strategic goal where fake accounts are central to the operation. There are two types of these activities that we work to stop: 1) coordinated inauthentic behavior in the context of domestic, non-government campaigns and 2) coordinated inauthentic behavior on behalf of a foreign or government actor.

When we find campaigns that include groups of accounts and Pages seeking to mislead people about who they are and what they are doing while relying on fake accounts, we remove both inauthentic and authentic accounts, Pages and Groups directly involved in this activity.

## CONTINUOUS ENFORCEMENT

We monitor for efforts to re-establish a presence on Facebook by networks we previously removed. Using both automated and manual detection, we continuously remove accounts and Pages connected to networks we took down in the past.

## SUMMARY OF OCTOBER 2021 FINDINGS

Our teams continue to focus on finding and removing deceptive campaigns around the world — whether they are foreign or domestic. In October, we removed one network in Nicaragua targeting domestic audiences in that country. We have shared information about our findings with industry partners, researchers and policymakers.

We know that influence operations will keep evolving in response to our enforcement, and new deceptive behaviors will emerge. We will continue to refine our enforcement and share our findings publicly. We are making progress rooting out this abuse, but as we've said before — it's an ongoing effort and we're committed to continually improving to stay ahead. That means building better technology, hiring more people and working closely with law enforcement, security experts and other companies.

(We will update the numbers as soon as the latest data becomes available)

- **Total number of Facebook accounts removed:** 937

- **Total number of Instagram accounts removed:** 363

- **Total number of Pages removed:** 140

- **Total number of Groups removed:** 24

## NETWORKS REMOVED IN OCTOBER 2021:

1. **Nicaragua**: We removed a network of 937 Facebook accounts, 140 Pages, 24 Groups and 363 Instagram accounts in Nicaragua. This operation targeted domestic audiences in that country and was linked to the government of Nicaragua and the Sandinista National Liberation Front (FSLN) party. We found one portion of this network through our internal investigation into suspected coordinated inauthentic behavior in the region, and another portion — as a result of reviewing public reporting about some of this activity.

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## IN DEPTH RESEARCH & ANALYSIS

### CROSS-GOVERNMENT TROLL FARM IN NICARAGUA

*By Luis Fernando Alonso, Intelligence Analyst, Ben Nimmo, Global IO Threat Intelligence Lead and the IO Threat Intelligence Team*

### EXECUTIVE SUMMARY:

We removed a troll farm run by the government of Nicaragua and the Sandinista National Liberation Front (FSLN) party. This was one of the most cross-government troll operations we've disrupted to date, with multiple state entities participating in this activity at once. It was primarily operated by employees of the Nicaraguan Institute of Telecommunications and the Post (TELCOR), working from the headquarters of the postal service in Managua. Additional smaller clusters of fake accounts were run from other government institutions, including the Supreme Court and the Nicaraguan Social Security Institute.

This campaign was cross-platform as well as cross-government. It ran a complex network of media brands across Facebook, Tiktok, Instagram, Twitter, YouTube, Blogspot and Telegram, as well as websites tied to these news entities. They posted positive content about the government and negative commentary about the opposition, using hundreds of fake accounts to promote these posts.

This network was an example of a "troll farm" — a coordinated effort by co-located operators to corrupt or manipulate public discourse by using fake accounts to build personas across platforms and mislead people about who's behind them. This is distinct from financially-motivated clickbait content farms which don't necessarily rely on fake accounts, but rather use Pages and Groups to post clickbait to drive people to off-platform websites and other channels to monetize.

This activity began in April 2018, as the Nicaraguan government repressed a wave of student-led nationwide protests, according to international reporting. Early on, in 2018-2019, the cross-platform network focused on discrediting the protesters, dissemination of false

information and mass reporting of people opposing the government. From late 2019 onwards, as the network became more complex, it shifted away from primarily criticizing the opposition and protesters to large-scale amplification of its own media brands and pro-government content. The campaign appeared to aim at flooding the cross-internet environment in Nicaragua with pro-government messages.

We found one portion of this network through our internal investigation into suspected coordinated inauthentic behavior in the region, and another portion — as a result of reviewing public reporting about some of this activity.

We removed this network for violating our policy against foreign or government interference, which is [coordinated inauthentic behavior](#) on behalf of a foreign or government entity. As it fused covert, party-linked and state-linked activity, we repeatedly saw links between the troll Pages and Pages associated with the government or the FSLN party.

As we said in [2019](#), operations run by a government to target its own citizens are particularly concerning when they combine deceptive techniques with the real-world power of a state. The use of government employees and infrastructure to run large-scale, cross-platform troll operations is an especially troubling trend: this year alone, we have taken down government-linked CIB networks in [Ethiopia](#), [Uganda](#), [Sudan](#), [Thailand](#) and [Azerbaijan](#).

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## TAKEDOWN BY THE NUMBERS

- *Presence on Facebook and Instagram:* 937 Facebook accounts, 140 Pages, 24 Groups and 363 Instagram accounts.

- *Followers:* About 585,000 accounts followed one or more of these Pages, about 74,500 accounts joined one or more of these Groups and about 125,000 accounts followed one or more of these Instagram accounts.

- *Advertising:* Around $12,000 in spending for ads on Facebook and Instagram paid for in Nicaraguan cordoba and US dollars. That includes the entirety of historic advertising activity by both inauthentic and authentic accounts removed as part of this network.

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## TROLLING IN MANAGUA

The operation began creating fake accounts in April 2018, when student-led protests against the government broke out across Nicaragua. At the time, this network launched an online campaign against the protesters and government critics. It created more fake accounts  — some of which

were detected and disabled by our automated systems — between April and June 2018 than in any other period.

Some of the operation's fake accounts posed as students from the Universidad Nacional Autónoma de Managua, which had served as one of the epicenters of student organizing in 2018. Other accounts posed as government supporters and called for "the people" to "take action" against the protesters, called out protest leaders and defended the detention and imprisonment of opposition figures.



LOS DELINCUENTES ATACANDO A LA POLICÍA DESDE LA CATEDRAL EN MANAGUA .BUENO ESTO SE ACABO NO VA A SER LA POLICIA LOS QUE VAN A SACARLOS VAMOS A SER NOSOTROS EL PUEBLO DE NICARAGUA LOS QUE TENEMOS QUE ACTUAR

Translate

Album containing 3 item(s)

**Image**

Post by a fake persona, calling the 2018 protesters "delinquents"

**Translation**

"The delinquents attacking the police from the cathedral in Managua. Well the end of this won't be the police, the ones who get them will be us, the people of Nicaragua, the ones who have to act."

The operation also attempted coordinated reporting of government critics in an apparent attempt to have them taken down from our platform to silence them. These included activists, independent media outlets and regular members of the public who had criticized government policies. Our review of these reports suggests that the great majority were rejected. In at least one case, the network tried to get a series of posts that exposed its activity taken down, including photos of an apparent troll facility inside the TELCOR building in Managua. This

attempt, too, failed. Despite being mostly unsuccessful, this tactic highlights how the organization sought to control the information environment of everyday Nicaraguan citizens.

Although the operators posed as regular citizens of Nicaragua, our investigation found that much of the activity was operated from government-linked entities in Managua, including TELCOR.

## HOW IT WORKED

The operation can be broadly divided into two phases. *First*, from early 2018 to 2019, it focused on denigrating members of the opposition. Some activity of this type continued throughout. However, from late 2019 onwards, it increasingly focused on posting and artificially amplifying praise about the Nicaraguan government and the ruling FSLN party. This activity also included non-political content about tourism and sports in Nicaragua. The volume of posting and the variety of media brands increased over time, likely in an attempt to dominate the public space across the internet with pro-government messaging and drown out dissenting voices.

As this behavior shifted, the network grew more complex, with wider participation across government. As well as fake profiles, the operators created a number of media brands — some of which represented themselves as independent or members of local communities — with presence across many social media platforms, blogs and websites. On some occasions, they attempted to impersonate political opposition organizations.
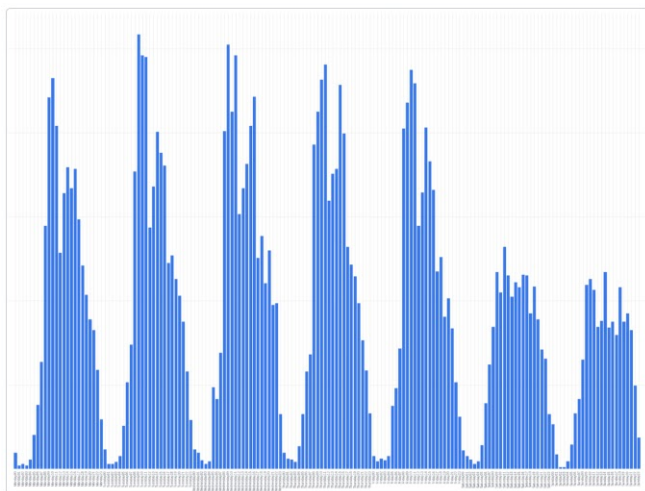


**Image**

One of the operation's main brands, the Molotov Digital blog, as of October 25, 2021. The website highlights the links to its social media accounts.

While the operation originated with TELCOR, we identified several additional clusters of connected activity that were operated from different government institutions. These additional governmental entities included the Supreme Court and the Nicaraguan Social Security Institute (INSS). According to open-source reporting, the TELCOR troll farm served as a training center

for staff at other government institutions, as well as the main hub of inauthentic activity. Our technical observations are aligned with this reporting.

The network was densely interwoven with the government's official communications infrastructure. We found technical overlaps between the troll operation and official Pages representing various branches of government and the FSLN party, and with parts of the state-controlled media that have been publicly linked to President Ortega's family. It worked on a clear schedule, from 9am to 5pm Monday through Friday, with an hour for lunch in the middle of the day, and only a skeleton crew at the weekends.



**Image**

The operation's shift pattern from Monday through Sunday, set to Managua time. Note the late-morning spike in activity, the drop in the middle of the day, and the significantly reduced volume of posting at weekends.

## CROSS-INTERNET MEDIA NETWORK

The backbone of this operation, especially in its later stages, was its set of media brands. These were based around websites, each of which maintained a stable of social media assets, including on Twitter, TikTok, Telegram and YouTube, as well as Facebook and Instagram.

As we called out in our Threat Report earlier this year, influence operations increasingly leverage media entities to lend credibility to their deceptive campaigns. The use of a large number of separate brands appears to have been an attempt to flood the Nicaraguan information space with pro-government content, creating the appearance of a vibrant and diverse public debate in what was a centrally orchestrated campaign.

The brands varied widely in visual style. Two of the earliest, called Molotov Digital and Siempre Mas Allá, were built on Blogspot and Blogger respectively. They used simple visual templates, but each featured high up on the page the links to their other accounts on Facebook, YouTube, Twitter and Telegram.

A third site, Redvolución (a play on words from "network" and "revolution"), offered a more sophisticated template based on WordPress, together with accounts on YouTube, Facebook, Twitter and Instagram. It is openly partisan in its content, featuring a banner that counted down the seconds "until the electoral triumph of the FSLN in 2021".



**Image:** Graphic by the Redvolución brand, calling out opposition leader Cristiana Chamorro, whose mother Violeta was Nicaragua's president from 1990 to 1997.

**Translation**

"Operation Danto 2021.

"X-ray of corruption: Chamorro family

"Cristiana and her husband Antonio Lacayo wielded real power.

"1992: The comptroller finds administrative and penal responsibility against Lacaya for embezzling a million dollars.

"The investigation unveiled illegal and unjustified subtraction, false invoices and nonexistent businesses.

"Antonio Lacayo wanted to obstruct the process.

"January 1993: Violeta Chamorro asks Parliament to dismiss comptroller Guillermo Potoy."

Several of the brands accused government critics of the sort of inauthentic behavior that the operation itself was engaged in. For example, the "Redvolución" website featured an entire section titled "Manipulation" which accused critics of the government and its international allies of spreading "fake news". Similarly, another Page, Nicaragua Noticias Falsas (Nicaragua Fake News), primarily focused on accusing regime critics of posting false information.

**Image**

A post by Nicaragua Noticias Falsas

**Translation**

**Page title:** "Nicaragua Fake News"

**Caption**: "The so-called 'Communication media' and Facebook Pages opposed to the Government of Nicaragua were recently exposed as the Fake News Chorus which published about COVID-19 to cause fear and disinform the Nicaraguan populace. Here is a list of the Right's propagandists."

**Image overlay:** "Communication media that spread fake news:

[Channel names]

"Facebook Pages which are thought to be communication media and spread fake news"

[Page names]

A few of the operation's brands linked themselves to the FSLN party. These included the website barricada[.]com[.]ni, whose logo included the FSLN's initials; the name is the same as that of an FSLN magazine in the 20th century. The Barricada website used the same Google Analytics code as the Redvolución and Radio Nicaragua websites.

These brands showed some variation in their approach. The larger, more "mainstream" brands, which were typically created after the 2018 protests, mixed pro-government and anti-opposition commentary. The smaller brands were often older and more aggressive in their approach: they primarily focused on accusing the opposition of a wide range of violations and abuses, including crimes against humanity. Large or small, all brands carried the same broad messages: support for the government which ran the operation and hostility to anyone who opposed it.
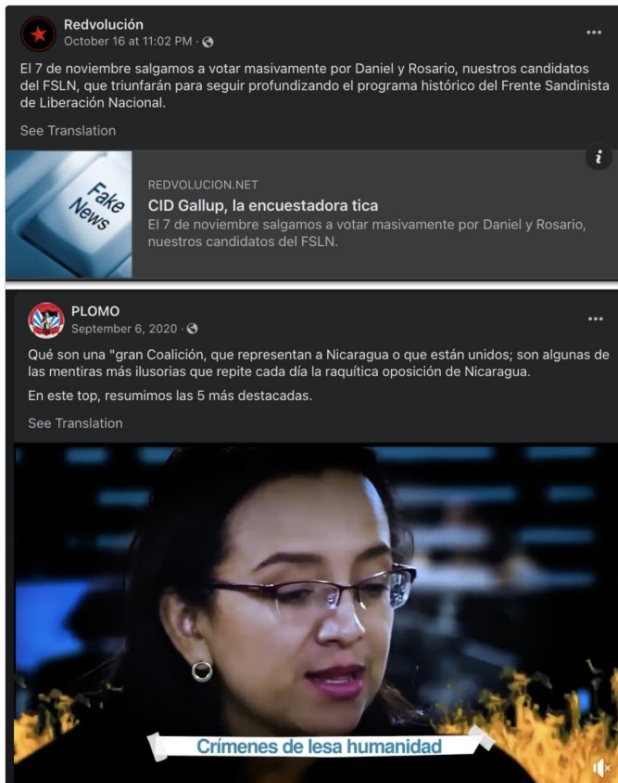
**Image**

Posts by the large "Redvolución" brand, top, and the smaller "Plomo" brand, bottom.

**Translation**

**Top post's caption:** "On November 7, we'll come out to vote massively for Daniel and Rosario, our FSLN candidates, who will triumph to carry on deepening the FSLN's historic program."

**Top post's headline:** "Fake News: CID Gallup, the tica [Costa Rican] pollster."

**Bottom post:** "What's a 'Grand Coalition, which represents Nicaragua or is united': it's among the most illusory lies that the rickety Nicaraguan opposition repeat every day. In this list, we summarize the 5 most outstanding ones."

**Image overlay:** "Crimes against humanity."