For Public Release

WeChat Report – Script for MP briefing

August 08, 2023

Introduction

- The purpose of this briefing is to alert you that Global Affairs Canada has detected an information operation targeting you.

- We acknowledge that this may be distressing to hear, and encourage you to seek clarification or raise any concerns once I have concluded my briefing.

- Most importantly, we want you to know that nothing we observed represents a threat to your safety or that of your family.

- It is our assessment that the information operation, which took place on WeChat, was intended to discredit you and negatively impact your reputation, not to cause you physical harm or put your family in danger.

- We also have an RRM Canada specialist, on hand to answer any technical questions.

Context

- The Rapid Response Mechanism Canada team at Global Affairs Canada discovered this information during monitoring activities related to the June 19, 2023, by-elections.

- These monitoring activities included searching for mentions of "Canadian member of parliament" and its variations on popular Chinese social media platforms.

- However, the information operation itself was **not** related to the June 2023 by-elections.

- The information operation coincided with Canada's designation of a Chinese diplomat as *persona non grata* (PNG) and subsequent retaliatory designation of a Canadian as PNG.

- We are informing you now because the RRM Canada team needed time to analyze the network and operation. There are technical limitations on the WeChat platform that make it difficult to analyze data at scale, and the network obscured its origin.

Activity

- Allow me to describe in more detail the information operation that the RRM team observed. During the period of May 4th to May 13th, a coordinated network of WeChat news accounts shared and amplified a large volume of false or misleading narratives about you.

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- The vast majority of activity seemed designed to spread false narratives about you. This included claims about your background, your political stances, and your family's Chinese heritage. For example:
    - These narratives sought to portray you as Canada's "anti-Chinese vanguard", or an "atypical" ethnic Chinese politician.
    - Other narratives targeted your relationships with your family, alleging your concern for relatives in Hong Kong was feigned.
    - Some also made claims about the political leaning of your constituency, arguing you are only raising concerns about PRC interference as a means to placate the "extreme right" constituents in your riding who are ""strongly racist towards Chinese".

Network

- The WeChat network displayed several indicators of information manipulation -- or coordinated inauthentic behaviour. Some of those indicators included, but were not limited to:
    1. coordinated content and timing;
    2. highly suspicious and abnormal shifts in volume and scope of engagement; and,
    3. the concealment of state involvement.

- One-third of the network included known state-media outlets and accounts that are likely linked to the People's Republic of China (PRC) state apparatus. Two-thirds of those accounts were anonymous, and their links to the PRC are opaque.

- These accounts had also not previously published any news stories on Canadian politics.

- However, these accounts published or interacted with content at similar times and dates, further amplifying and increasing the likelihood WeChat users would see the false narratives.

Attribution

- An analysis of the network and the operation revealed that, while China's role in the information operation is highly probable, unequivocal proof that China ordered and directed the operation is not possible to determine due to the covert nature of how social media networks are leveraged in this type of information campaign. When making this assessment, RRM Canada looks at three to four components to identify state involvement.
    - The tactical and technical level: which assesses the technical network activity, and how the operation is delivered to users.
    - The operational level: which compares the sophistication of the operation with known capabilities of other state and non-state actors.
    - The strategic level: which tries to understand the rationale of an operation.

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- Based on tactical, operational and strategic indicators, such as how similar this operation is to others we have seen from the PRC, we assess it is highly probable that the state participated in the operation and a medium-to-high-level of confidence that the state actively directed and coordinated the entire operation.

- We say that China's role in the information operation is highly probably because a majority of the network self-identify as state affiliated, or expert researchers identify them as state affiliated.

- It should be noted that assessing state involvement is a nuanced process, and is both science and art. It requires us recognize the limitations and challenges of the tools we have at our disposal. To provide technical attribution, such as those used in cyber security studies, WeChat would need to confirm our findings. However, unlike US social media platforms, WeChat has no history of providing data disclosures to the Canadian or US government, which would allow us to do technical attribution. Hence why RRM Canada focuses on assessments and probabilities of state involvement.

Scale

- It is difficult to provide an exact figure on how many users viewed or engaged with the content about you through liking, sharing, and commenting.

- There are over 1.3 billion monthly active users of WeChat, with at least 100 million of said users located outside mainland China. The network sharing the false narratives included highly popular news and blog accounts with tens of millions of followers.

- These accounts were likely selected because WeChat users would be familiar with them and a wide domestic and international audience – including Canadians – would see the false narratives.

- Global Affairs Canada estimates that between 2 to 5 million WeChat users could have viewed this content globally.

- We are limited to providing only an estimate because WeChat does not provide "follower" figures for accounts, and caps engagement metrics in the low hundred-thousand range.

- WeChat has not revealed the total number of Canadian WeChat users. Some internet marketing firms suggest there are 1 to 1.2 million users in Canada.

What is the Government doing about it?

- So what is the government doing about this?

- Step one was to inform you about this disinformation campaign, which is what I am doing now. Immediately following this briefing, I will send you a copy of the RRM report on this information operation as well.

- We will also be conducting diplomatic engagement with PRC representatives in Canada today to convey our serious concerns with the activity observed on

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WeChat. We want to be clear that the direct or indirect support by the PRC in dissemination of disinformation related to members of Canadian parliament, and within Canada more broadly, it totally unacceptable.

- We will continue to explore how to most effectively engage the Chinese company that owns and operates WeChat – Tencent in our broader work to advocate for content moderation on social media platforms

- We will also release a press statement about the findings of the report and share the same report you will receive with media, to shine a light on how disinformation can be used against Canadian parliamentarians.

- Lastly, we are engaging with academia to encourage further research and analysis into foreign information manipulation and interference in relation to Canadian democratic institutions.

Resources and information to protect from or report suspected Foreign Interference

[These are boilerplate bullets provided by PCO on the topic of Foreign Interference]

- In your role as an elected member of Parliament, you are of interest to those states that seek to influence Canadian democratic institutions. But there are things you can do to protect yourself from foreign interference; let me close my briefing by providing few techniques you can use:

- Be careful with the information you share (in a public, to the media or private), and take note of unexpected online interactions. This is especially pertinent in how you handle sensitive information.

- Be aware of inappropriate requests which involve money, and question the source of suspicious donations or "gifts".

- Take note of unnatural social interactions, frequent requests to meet privately, out-of-place introductions or engagements, gifts and offers of all expenses paid travel.

- Practice good cybersecurity hygiene: use strong passwords, enable two-factor authentication, and don't click on links or open attachments unless you are certain of who sent them and why.

- If you wish to report suspected foreign interference activity or other issues of national security concern, the RCMP, the Canadian Security Intelligence Service (CSIS), the Communications Security Establishment's Canadian Centre for Cyber Security all have telephone and online reporting mechanisms. We will send this information to you in writing as well.

- This concludes the briefing. If you have any additional questions – including any technical ones – we will be happy to answer them.

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Questions and Answers

1. *Why have you briefed MP Chong on your findings?*

   - Following the Prime Minister's instructions to CSIS that MPs are briefed on potential instances of threats to parliamentarians, GAC made the decision to brief MP Chong on its findings of a potential foreign directed information operation that sought to artificially amplify a false narrative about the parliamentarian.

2. *Why did you not brief MPs and candidates during GE44 (including Kenny Chiu)?*

   - During the writ period, SITE members regularly invited representatives from political parties – including the CPC, LPC, NDP, BQ and GPC for threat briefings on SITE members' findings.

   - As officials have discussed in public and before Parliamentary committees, not all intelligence is clearly actionable.

   - This is especially the case when it is not possible to fully attribute information manipulation to a malign foreign state. In such contexts, responses rest on probabilities and likelihoods and must be carefully calibrated to avoid doing more harm than good, like negatively affecting freedom of expression or inadvertently amplifying disinformation narratives.

3. *How do you compare the information operation directed against Mr. Chiu and MP Chong?*

   - The account behavior RRM Canada observed during GE44 is comparable to what we observed in the recent information operation against MP Chong.

   - During GE44, RRM Canada observed: 1) some coordination between WeChat accounts on narratives and themes, 2) news articles publishing at similar time intervals to boost visibility of key narratives, and 3) lax content moderation standards from Tencent – WeChat's parent company – that allowed false or misleading content to spread quickly on its platform.

   - In both GE44 and the recent case involving MP Chong, RRM Canada was unable to fully attribute the behavior we observed to foreign state actor.

   - WeChat is unlikely to provide data disclosures about account activity on its platform that would allow us to provide a more fulsome picture of attribution.

   a. *Are the tactics the same?*

   - The tactics are similar, but in the case of MP Chong, RRM Canada has a higher level of confidence of state involvement.

   - RRM Canada assessed this high level of confidence based on numerous indicators, such as:

     o the coordinated content and timing;

     o the highly suspicious and abnormal shifts in volume and scope of engagement;

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- o and the significant involvement of state media accounts, and concealment of ties to the state.

- In the case of GE44, RRM Canada observed a network of accounts that had opaque or unclear affiliations to a foreign government. However, in the case of MP Chong, we observed a network of accounts in which RRM Canada has a higher level of confidence is associated with the state.

- In both cases, RRM Canada observed state-supported tabloid the *Global Times* appear early during the information operation, and set the tone for the kinds of narratives, themes, and behavior that was permissible for the other accounts to take. Because of the tabloid's popularity, WeChat took a permissive attitude to narratives seeded by the outlet and did not seek to apply industry content moderation standards on false and misleading narratives circulating on social media platforms.

    b. *Are the media outlets the same? The same network?*

- In both cases, the *Global Times* played a key role in setting the tone for the kinds of narratives that were permissible to circulate. However, in GE44 and the recent case related to MP Chong, RRM Canada noted a separate set of actors that amplified the narratives for each case. While the Global Times sets the tone, the false narratives were amplified by different sets of actors.

4. *What are you doing to counter such information operations?*

- There are several response options that the Government of Canada are considering.

- Public disclosure of the findings itself is one such response.

- We are also working with our partners, such as through the G7 Rapid Response Mechanism, to share information about such threats to democracy and develop collective responses.

5. *How will you ensure that such operations do not take place during GE45? Do you have a plan?*

- There are a number of initiatives under way to help protect the next federal general election.

- Additionally, we are eagerly awaiting the final recommendations of the three parallel reviews: the National Security and Intelligence Review Agency (NSIRA); the National Security and Intelligence Committee of Parliamentarians (NSICOP); and the Standing Committee on Procedure and House Affairs (PROC).

- GAC will continue to explore how to most effectively engage the Chinese company that owns and operates WeChat – Tencent in our broader work to advocate for content moderation on social media platforms.

6. *Why are you taking action now and not before?*

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- The Government is continually seeking to improve efforts to counter foreign interference and take action against threats to democracy.
- As the National Security and Intelligence Advisor to the Prime Minister said to CBC recently, MP Chong should have been told about the interest that was expressed in his family as a result of his work on the Uyghur motion.
- Now, we are improving the process, to ensure that intelligence can flow more effectively to officials, politicians, and the media, as appropriate.

7. *How long does a report like this take to write?*

- This activity was first observed by the RRM Canada team during the June 19, 2023 by-elections. Given the activity was not related to the by-elections, which was the focus of the work at that time, the team as unable to fully analyze the activity until late June.
- Due to the technical limitations on the WeChat platform, the RRM Canada team required sufficient time to analyze the network and operation. As the activity itself was time-limited and was not determined to be ongoing, the team took a number of weeks to properly analyze the information in order to reach the conclusions with a high level of confidence. As in all instances of potential foreign interference, there is a requirement for thorough monitoring, analysis, and consultation with the security and intelligence community before drawing conclusions.
- By late July, the report was finalized, after GAC worked with other involved departments to review and assess the information, and which Deputy Ministers reviewed and agreed on next steps.

8. *Who was the report shared with? Who are all RRM Canada reports shared with?*

- This report has only been shared within the Government of Canada.
- We believe the findings of the report on PRC tactics, techniques, and procedures are important to share with our domestic partners, and trusted international allies.
- RRM Canada regularly shares reports within the Government of Canada and with key G7+ partners who are part of the G7 RRM.

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