

Bolivarian Factions: Facebook Takes Down Inauthentic Assets

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September 4, 2020



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1 Introduction

On August 31, 2020, Facebook removed a network of 55 Facebook accounts, 42 Pages and 36 Instagram accounts attributed to the US-based strategic communications firm CLS Strategies for engaging in coordinated inauthentic behavior (CIB). In its [report](#), Facebook stated that the accounts violated its policy against foreign interference or coordinated inauthentic behavior on behalf of a foreign entity and that the accounts focused on Venezuela, Mexico and Bolivia. Facebook shared a portion of this network with the authors on August 26, 2020. In our investigation, we found that the network involved in this takedown operated fake and duplicate user accounts under the same names. Based on public records, we were able to connect some of the assets on Facebook to CLS Strategies personnel and determine that the firm had worked or was working on behalf of the Bolivian government.

Key takeaways:

- 11 Facebook pages related to Bolivia mainly supported Bolivia’s Interim President Jeanine Áñez and disparaged Bolivia’s former president Evo Morales. All had similar creation dates and manager location settings.
- Venezuela-focused assets supported and promoted Venezuelan opposition leaders but changed in tone in 2020, reflecting factional divides in the opposition and a turn away from Juan Guaidó.
- In addition to fake accounts, removed Facebook accounts include six profiles that match the names and photos of CLS Strategies employees listed publicly on their website and appear to be their real accounts.
- CLS Strategies has a disclosed contract with the Bolivian government to provide strategic communications counsel for Bolivia’s 2020 elections and to strengthen democracy and human rights in Bolivia.
- Coordinated inauthentic behavior reports from Facebook and Twitter have increasingly included assets linked to marketing and PR firms originating and acting around the world. The firms’ actions violate the platforms’ terms by operating internationally and failing to identify their origins and motivations to users.

2 Summary Statistics

The part of the network suspended by Facebook and shared with the Stanford Internet Observatory (SIO) included 28 Pages, 41 Profiles and 21 Instagram accounts.

2.1 Facebook Pages

17 of the Pages had names relating to Venezuela and 11 to Bolivia. The Venezuelan pages were created between 2015 and 2020 and included names like “Venezolanos en Resistencia” (Venezuelans in Resistance) and “Muere la opresión — Venezuela libre” (Kill the oppression — Free Venezuela). The Bolivian pages were all created in February 2020 and many supported political parties and candidates.

Page Name	Translated Page Name	Creation Date	Manager Locations	Followers	Target Country
Todos Somos Polar	We are all Polar	06/23/15	United States (4), Venezuela (2)	163125	Venezuela
Deshecho en Socialismo	Undone With Socialism	12/02/15		1456	Venezuela
Venezolanos en Resistencia	Venezuelans In Resistance	06/09/17	United States (2)	2712	Venezuela
Real VZLA	Real Venezuela	07/24/17		866	Venezuela
FAN Chavista	FAN of Chavez	12/08/17	United States (6)	20344	Venezuela
No Podemos Más	We Can't Any More	02/06/18	United States (5)	77593	Venezuela
NotiVenezuela	VenezuelaNews	06/11/18	United States (6), Ecuador (2)	20555	Venezuela
Venezuela De Pie	Stand Up Venezuela	09/06/18	United States (4), Peru (1)	142704	Venezuela
End The Crisis	End The Crisis	09/13/18		0	Venezuela
Venezuela Ahora	Venezuela Now	10/10/18	United States (7)	6669	Venezuela
Revive Venezuela	Revive Venezuela	10/10/18		0	Venezuela
Soldados Libertadores	Liberating Soldiers	11/14/18	United States (7)	13393	Venezuela
No Te Reconocemos	We Don't Recognize You	01/04/19	United States (7)	11099	Venezuela
Muera la opresión - Venezuela libre	Die Oppression - Free Venezuela	07/02/19	United States (4)	241	Venezuela
Venezuela está con María Corina	Venezuela is with María Corina	07/02/19	United States (4)	316	Venezuela
El Saqueo	The Looting	01/14/20		3	Venezuela
VZ Admin	VZ Admin	05/26/20		0	Venezuela
Cambas con Jeanine	Cambas* with Jeanine	02/04/20	United States (4), Bolivia (1), Venezuela (1)	620	Bolivia
Unidad Bolivia	Bolivian Unity	02/04/20	United States (4), Bolivia (1), Venezuela (1)	720	Bolivia
Todos con Áñez	Everyone with Áñez	02/05/20	United States (4), Bolivia (1), Venezuela (1)	2786	Bolivia
Prohibido olvidar	Forbidden to Forget	02/05/20	United States (4), Bolivia (1), Venezuela (1)	595	Bolivia
Bolivia Elecciones 2020	Bolivia Elections 2020	02/05/20	United States (4), Bolivia (1), Venezuela (1)	569	Bolivia
Camacho Lovers Santa Cruz	Camacho Lovers Santa Cruz	02/05/20	United States (4), Bolivia (1), Venezuela (1)	801	Bolivia
Pititas Liberación	Pititas† Liberation	02/05/20	United States (4), Bolivia (1), Venezuela (1)	1014	Bolivia
Nunca MAS	No MAS‡	02/06/20	United States (4), Bolivia (1), Venezuela (1)	1795	Bolivia
Bolivianas Libres	Free Bolivians	02/06/20	United States (4), Bolivia (1), Venezuela (1)	397	Bolivia
Bolificado	Boliverified	02/06/20	United States (4), Bolivia (1), Venezuela (1)	14	Bolivia
MAS para Bolivia	MAS for Bolivia	02/26/20	United States (4), Bolivia (1), Venezuela (1)	1802	Bolivia

*Cambas is a demonym for people from the eastern states of Bolivia
†Pititas is a term for a social movement in Bolivia
‡This is a play on words. MAS is both the acronym for the Movement for Socialism political party and the Spanish word for "more".

Figure 1: Suspended Pages ordered by creation date and target country.

2.2 Facebook Accounts

The 41 Facebook accounts in the dataset included six profiles that shared names and profile pictures with current or former employees of CLS Strategies, the firm Facebook attributed to the takedown. These appeared to be the actual accounts of those individuals. Many other profiles in the dataset used stock images of professional athletes, landscapes or other reused images as their profile pictures.

2.3 Instagram Accounts

The 21 Instagram accounts in the dataset primarily targeted Venezuela. 10 of the accounts shared usernames or display names with Facebook Pages and accounts in the dataset.

Instagram Username	Instagram Display Name (translation)	Biography	Biography Translation	Followers
vzdepie	Venezuela De Pie (Stand Up Venezuela)	ORGANIZA, DIFUNDE Y PARTICIPA 🇻🇪 Ayúdanos a difundir la protesta de las comunidades en Venezuela. Aportes por DM	ORGANIZE, SHARE AND PARTICIPATE 🇻🇪 Help us share the community protests in Venezuela. Contributions by DM	12955
elnegromarchena	El Negro Marchena (The Negro Marchena)	Contra la falsa democracia de #NicolásMaduro y sus socios "militares" narcotraficantes y corruptos que reprimen y manipulan al pueblo venezolano.	Against the false democracy of #NicolásMaduro and his "military" drug trafficking and corrupt associates who repress and manipulate the Venezuelan people	6558
npmvzla	No Podemos Más (We Can't Any More)			6199
el_saqueo	El Saqueo (The Looting)	Descubriendo quienes son los saqueadores de las riquezas de Venezuela. ENVÍANOS INFORMACIÓN POR MENSAJE DIRECTO. DENUNCIAS ANÓNIMAS	Discovering who are the looters of the riches of Venezuela. SEND US INFORMATION BY DIRECT MESSAGE. REPORTS ARE ANONYMOUS	4017
notereconocemos	#NoTeReconocemos (We Don't Recognize You)			3373
vzlahambrienta	VzlaHambrienta (HungryVzla)			2613
frentelibrevzla	Frente Amplio Venezuela Libre (Broad Front Free Venezuela)			1805
madurostyle	Maduro Style	Maduro, patria y muerte 🇻🇪	Maduro, motherland and death 🇻🇪	1505
soldadosvzla	Soldados Libertadores (Liberating Soldiers)			1197
noticiasen_venezuela	Noticias en Venezuela (News in Venezuela)	Portal de noticias en Venezuela Información audaz y verídica. Contacto: prensanoticiasvenezuela@gmail.com	Outlet for news in Venezuela True and bold information. Contact: prensanoticiasvenezuela@gmail.com	1172
fanchavista	Fanchavista (Chavezfan)			547
soyagullanegra	Águila Negra (Black Eagle)			479
unmaduristadeverdad	Un Madurista de Verdad (A True Madurista)			186
periodistasvtv	Periodistas VTV (VTV Journalists)	Cuenta de periodistas despedidos de forma humillante de VTV pero con buenos contactos adentro.	Account of journalists who were humiliatingly fired from VTV but still have good contacts on the inside.	170
venezuela_ahora	Venezuela Ahora (Venezuela Now)			130
vz_resistencia	Venezolanos en Resistencia (Venezuelans in Resistance)			53
joveneslibertad	JovenesPorLaLibertad (Youth for Liberty)			38
yessicabongiorno	Yessi Bongiorno 🇮🇹	De mi llano venezolano. Vivo libre y busco el camino de los sabios. Respeto lo que no te guste de mí, pero tampoco escribo poesía. Amante del mar.	From my Venezuelan prairie. I live free and seek the path of the wise. I respect what you don't like about me, but I don't write poetry either. Lover of the sea.	29
baltazarmaduro	Baltazar Maduro	#SinCensura y #SinMiedo #CaigaQuienCaiga	#Uncensored and #Fearless #Thosewhofallwillfall	17
alexdelafontaine1234	Alex de La Fontaine			11
infozulia	InfoZulia	Notas de interés e información del Zulia	Interesting news and information from Zulia	3
Matches a Facebook Page in the dataset				
Matches a Facebook Account in the dataset				

Figure 2: Instagram accounts sorted by follower count. Accounts in pink share names with Pages in the dataset; accounts in blue share names with profiles.

3 Marketing Firms and Coordinated Inauthentic Behavior

The use of strategic communications firms to run political influence campaigns is an increasingly popular strategy that has been at the heart of many coordinated inauthentic behavior removals on social media platforms. Facebook’s **policy on Inauthentic Behavior** defines it as the use of Facebook assets to mislead people about the identity, popularity, purpose or source of content on any Facebook or Instagram assets. It further restricts content that engages in or claims to engage in “Foreign or Government Interference, which is Coordinated Inauthentic Behavior conducted on behalf of a foreign or government actor.” Twitter enforces its similar **Platform Manipulation policy** when removing networks. In the last year, Facebook and Twitter have taken public action on numerous networks associated with private media, consulting, marketing, and public relations firms for violations of this policy:

- July 2020 — **Facebook removed accounts** linked to Estraterra, an Ecuadorian/Canadian public relations firm. The accounts primarily targeted Ecuador but also shared content aimed at other South American

countries. DFRLab **independently analyzed** the Estraterra network.

- April 2020 — **Facebook** and **Twitter** removed accounts linked to a digital marketing firm previously known as DotDev and based out of the UAE and Egypt, as well as accounts linked to marketing firm Smaat in Saudi Arabia. The accounts supported the political positions of Saudi Arabia, the UAE and Egypt, and denigrated their regional rivals, Turkey, Qatar and Iran. SIO **independently analyzed** these networks.
- February 2020 — **Facebook removed accounts** linked to aRep Global, a digital marketing firm in India that targeted the Gulf region, the US, the UK, and Canada. They also removed a network of accounts linked to two marketing firms in Egypt, New Waves and Flexell, that targeted the Middle East and North Africa. DFRLab **independently analyzed** the Egyptian networks.
- December 2019 — **Twitter removed accounts** linked to Smaat, a social media marketing company based in Saudi Arabia. The network pushed political narratives aligned with the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia and targeted Qatar, Iran and Turkey. SIO **independently analyzed** the Smaat network.
- September 2019 — **Twitter removed accounts** linked to DotDev, a private technology company operating in the UAE and Europe.
- August 2019 — **Facebook removed accounts** linked to two marketing firms, New Waves in Egypt and Newave in the UAE. The companies were not directly linked to state actors but campaigns were aligned with the political interests of Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Egypt and Bahrain. DFRLab **independently analyzed** the network.
- May 2019 — **Facebook removed accounts** linked to the Archimedes Group, a commercial entity based in Israel. The activity targeted Africa, Latin America and Southeast Asia. These campaigns appeared to be financial and not political in nature. DFRLab **independently analyzed** the Archimedes Group network.

As platforms increasingly take action, it is apparent that these campaigns have become a lucrative and in-demand service, and there are a host of digital marketing firms willing to provide them and profit off of them.

3.1 CLS Strategies: A Firm Counseling Latin American Governments

CLS Strategies is a U.S.-based strategic communications and public affairs firm based in Washington, D.C. According to its **website**, CLS Strategies designs solutions to represent and help clients in different contexts, including “the halls of government, the marketplace and the court of public opinion.” Some of these clients are nongovernmental organizations and foreign governments for which CLS Strategies “represent their interests in Washington, D.C., and elsewhere.”

CLS Strategies has counseled several Latin American governments, including those of Brazil, Colombia, Ecuador, Mexico, Nicaragua, and Peru, as well

as presidential candidates throughout the region, such as Brazil’s Fernando Henrique Cardoso, Colombia’s Álvaro Uribe Vélez, and Argentina’s Sergio Tomás Massa.

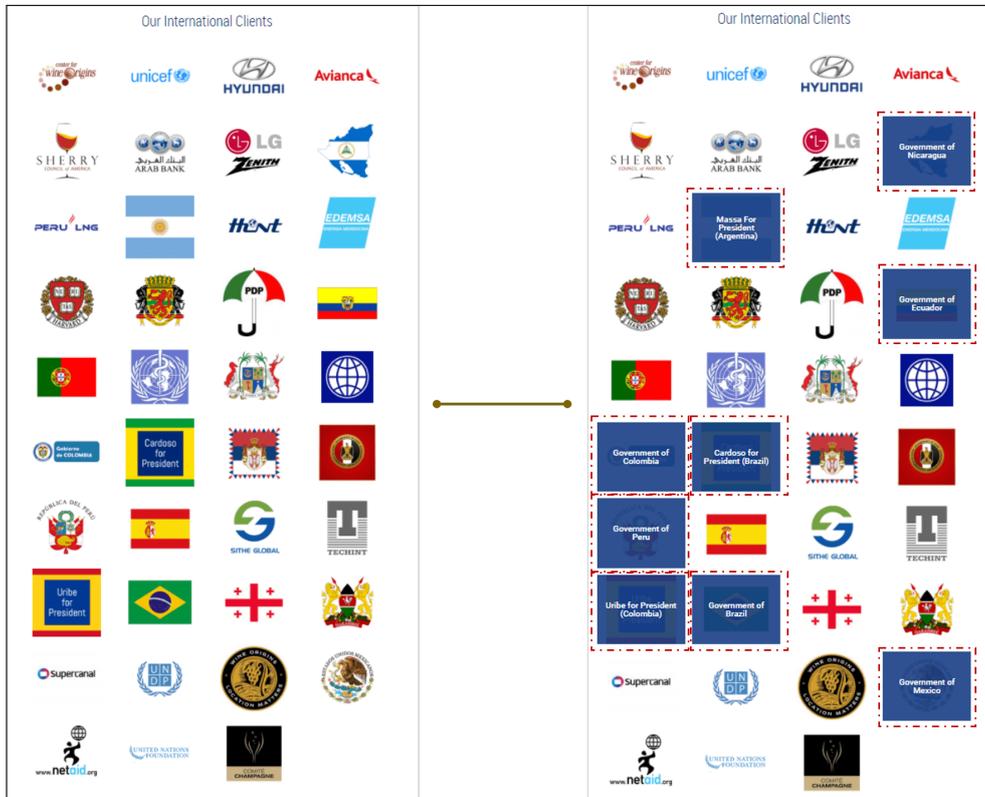


Figure 3: A screengrab of CLS Strategies’ featured international clients, including Latin American governments and private companies. The blue highlighted boxes show clients linked to Latin America. (Source: [CLS Strategies/archive](#)).

Although the assets involved in this takedown – focusing on Bolivia and Venezuela – were attributed to CLS Strategies, the firm’s website does not list these countries among their international client lists. A partner at the firm does **list in his bio** that he “has worked with some of the leading political leaders in Latin America such as [...] the Venezuelan opposition, helping with political communications, campaign strategy and developing digital-based campaigns.” CLS Strategies additionally registered as a foreign agent to the Plurinational State of Bolivia – the Bolivian government – under the Foreign Agents Registration Act (FARA) on December 11, 2019.

issues of interest to the Plurinational State of Bolivia in the United States. This includes creating and distributing communications materials, interfacing with the media, and providing communications services as directed by the Plurinational State of Bolivia.”

On July 29, 2020, CLS Strategies filed a **supplemental statement** recording activities in the previous six months. The statement detailed a set of meetings arranged in Washington, DC for the Bolivian Minister of Government and various policy makers between December 16-18, 2019. **Tweets** from the Minister’s official account confirm these meetings. The July filing stated that CLS Strategies’s connection with the foreign official ended March 1, 2020 and that CLS Strategies had not yet been paid.

On September 3, 2020, the Bolivian government issued a **press release** regarding their relationship with CLS Strategies. In the release, they stated that the company was hired “to support the democratic process after the electoral fraud in October 2019.” The statement acknowledged the activities as listed in CLS Strategies’ July filings and confirmed that they had not paid CLS Strategies due to current legal restrictions.

Eight of the accounts shared by Facebook share names with listed employees of CLS Strategies. One of the removed accounts, “William Moore,” also appeared in a FARA related to the agreement between CLS Strategies and the Bolivian government.

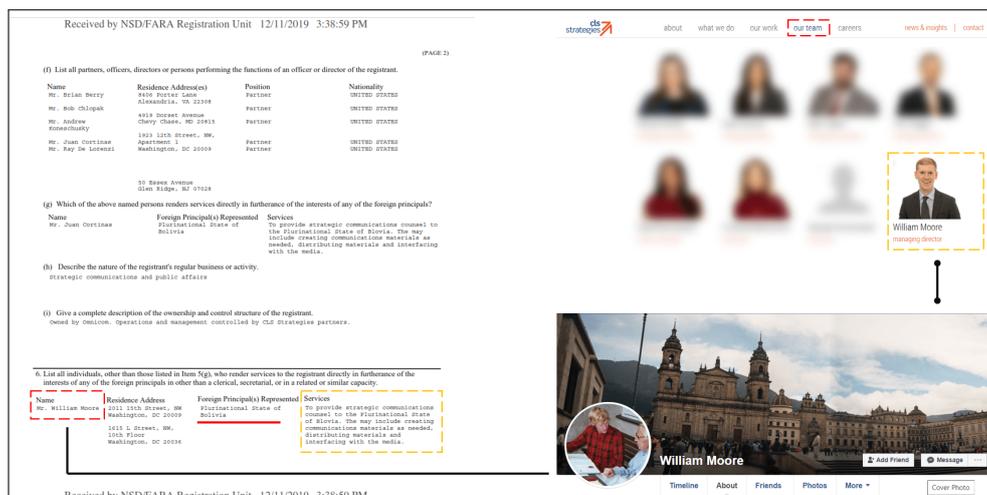


Figure 6: Screensgrabs from the Foreign Agents Registration Act (FARA) document (Registration Statement) filed in December 2019 between CLS Strategies and the Plurinational State of Bolivia (left), the “Our team” section on the CLS Strategies website (top right), and the removed Facebook user account of “William Moore.” Screensgrabs are from August 30, 2020. As of September 4, 2020, William Moore no longer appears on the CLS Strategies website. (Source: efile.fara.gov left; www.clsstrategies.com, top right; Facebook, bottom right)

Including Moore, six user accounts involved in this takedown shared names and profile pictures with current and former CLS Strategies employees, and one shared a name but had no public profile picture.

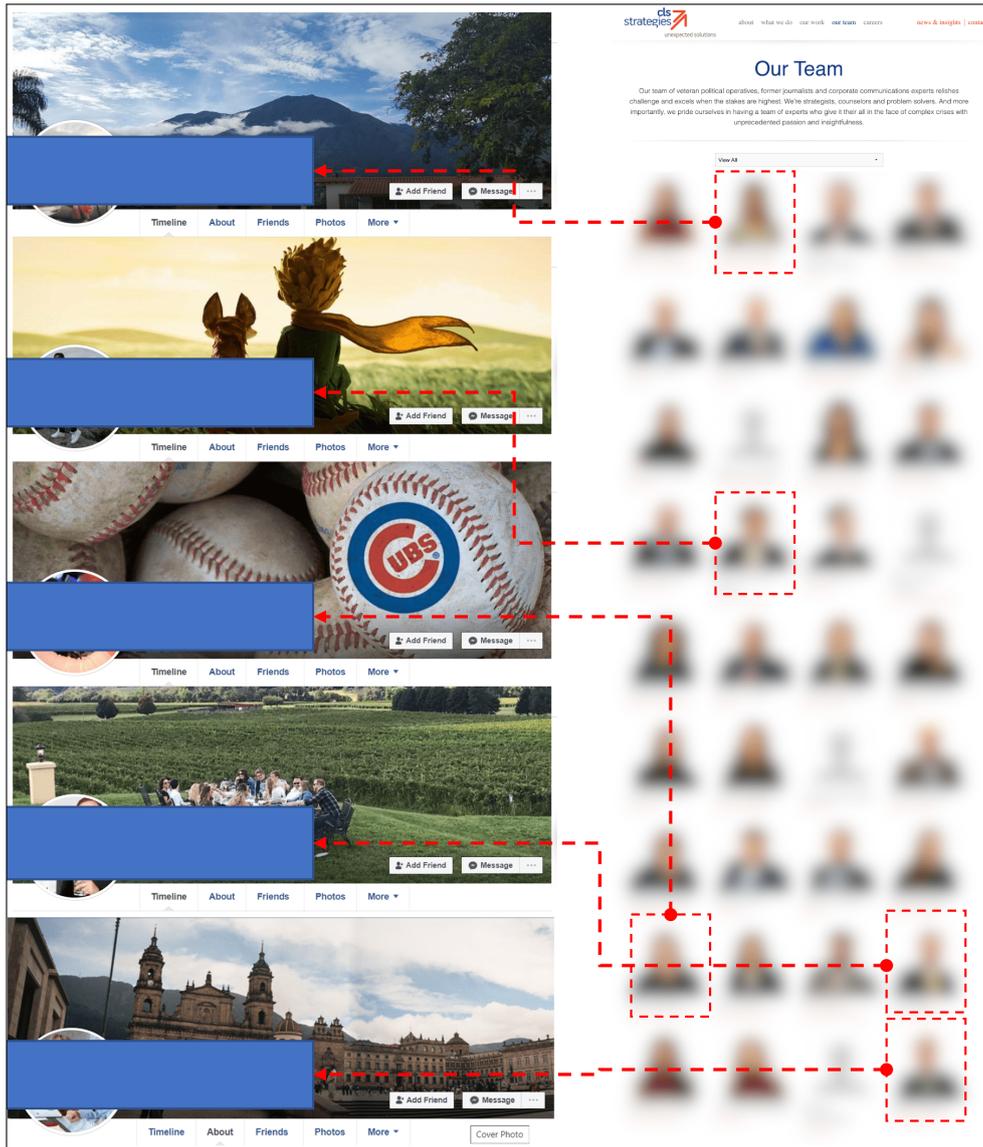


Figure 7: Screenshot from five of the removed user accounts on Facebook that match the names of listed CLS Strategies employees from their website. Screenshot from August 30, 2020. As of September 4, 2020, these employees no longer appear on the CLS Strategies website. (Source: Facebook, left; www.clsstrategies.com, right)

The accounts provided by Facebook also included a “Chlopak Leonard.” In 2014, CLS Strategies changed its name from **Chlopak Leonard Schechter & Associates**. The account had no public profile picture or “about” information.

4 The Bolivia Operation

4.1 Political Context

On October 20, 2019, the Plurinational State of Bolivia held general elections for the president and congress. In the contested election, incumbent three term president Evo Morales of the Movimiento al Socialismo party (Movement for Socialism or MAS) was declared to have won a plurality of the vote and an 11 percentage point victory over his nearest opponent. Protests erupted

immediately alleging voter fraud and demanding Morales step down. On November 10, election auditors from the Organization of American States submitted their preliminary analysis of the election, finding flawed result transmissions, forged signatures on tally sheets, and deficient chain of custody in the voting. That day, amid mounting pressure from the police and the armed forces, Morales resigned after nearly 14 years in power, and the next day he left the country and sought political asylum in Mexico.

After Morales’s resignation, the second vice president of the Bolivian Senate, Jeanine Áñez Chávez assumed the role of interim president. Áñez is a member of the Movimiento Demócrata Social party (Democrat Social Movement or MDS), a center-right party politically opposed to Morales and largely drawing support from the wealthier eastern half of the country. On January 3, 2020, the electoral court set May 3 as the date for new general elections. On January 24, Áñez announced her own candidacy for president of the country after previously saying she would not run. In March, the Áñez government announced that it would postpone the election to September due to concerns around COVID-19. In July 2020, the election date was again postponed citing COVID-19 concerns, this time to October 18.

4.2 Themes and Tactics

The 11 Facebook pages focusing on Bolivia were mainly supported Bolivia’s Interim President Jeanine Áñez and attacked Bolivia’s former president Evo Morales. 10 of the pages were created between February 4-6, 2020, and one was created on February 26. Page Transparency information for all 11 Pages showed the same manager location settings: four managers in the US, one in Bolivia and one in Venezuela.

Page Name	Category	Creation Date	Manager Locations	Likes	Followers	Target Country
Todos Somos Polar	Community	2015-06-23	United States (4), Venezuela (2)	163331	163126	Venezuela
Deshecho en Socialismo	Cause	2015-12-02		1463	1456	
Venezolanos en Resistencia	Community	2017-06-09	United States (2)	2572	2712	Venezuela
Real VZLA	Cause	2017-07-24		832	866	Venezuela
FAN Chavista	Community	2017-12-08	United States (6)	17381	20344	Venezuela
No Podemos Más	Community	2018-02-06	United States (5)	73180	77593	Venezuela
NotVenezuela	Community	2018-06-11	United States (6), Ecuador (2)	19191	20553	Venezuela
Venezuela De Pie	Community	2018-09-06	United States (4), Peru (1)	136811	142794	Venezuela
End The Crisis	Community	2018-09-13		0	0	
Venezuela Ahora	Media/news compan	2018-10-10	United States (7)	5750	6669	Venezuela
Revive Venezuela	Community	2018-10-10		0	0	
Soldados Libertadores	Community	2018-11-14	United States (7)	10892	13393	Venezuela
No Te Reconocemos	Community	2019-01-04	United States (7)	10128	11099	Venezuela
Muera la opresión - Venezuela libre	Community	2019-07-02	United States (4)	195	241	Venezuela
Venezuela esté con María Corina	Community	2019-07-02	United States (4)	301	316	Venezuela
El Saqueo	Community	2020-01-14		1	3	Venezuela
Cambas con Jeanine	Cause	2020-02-04	United States (4), Bolivia (1), Venezuela (1)	605	620	Bolivia
Unidad Bolivia	Cause	2020-02-04	United States (4), Bolivia (1), Venezuela (1)	670	720	Bolivia
Todos con Áñez	Interest	2020-02-05	United States (4), Bolivia (1), Venezuela (1)	1859	2786	Bolivia
Prohibido olvidar	Cause	2020-02-05	United States (4), Bolivia (1), Venezuela (1)	524	595	Bolivia
Bolivia Elecciones 2020	Cause	2020-02-05	United States (4), Bolivia (1), Venezuela (1)	539	569	Bolivia
Carmacho Lovers Santa Cruz	Cause	2020-02-05	United States (4), Bolivia (1), Venezuela (1)	795	801	Bolivia
Pirritas Liberación	Cause	2020-02-05	United States (4), Bolivia (1), Venezuela (1)	822	1014	Bolivia
Nunca MAS	Interest	2020-02-06	United States (4), Bolivia (1), Venezuela (1)	1271	1795	Bolivia
Bolivianas Libres	Cause	2020-02-06	United States (4), Bolivia (1), Venezuela (1)	309	397	Bolivia
Bolifacado	Cause	2020-02-06	United States (4), Bolivia (1), Venezuela (1)	14	14	Bolivia
MAS para Bolivia	Community	2020-02-26	United States (4), Bolivia (1), Venezuela (1)	1781	1802	Bolivia
VZ Admin	Community	2020-05-26		0	0	

Facebook pages created between February 4 and 26, 2020, focusing on Bolivia.

Figure 8: Table showing the Facebook pages involved in the takedown ordered by creation date. (Source: Facebook; Visualization: Esteban Ponce de León)

The most popular Page in the set, “Todos con Áñez” (Everyone with Áñez), garnered 2,786 likes. That Page along with “Cambas con Jeanine,” and “Unidad Bolivia” pushed content promoting interim president Jeanine Áñez.



Figure 9: Screenshot from pages showing content supporting Bolivia’s interim president Jeanine Áñez as a candidate for the 2020 Bolivian elections. (Source: Facebook)

Most pages opposed former president Morales and supported the interim government or other right-wing candidates. Some of the pages involved in this subset of assets, such as the page “Nunca MAS” (“Never MAS”), shared content that attempted to discredit Evo Morales and his political party MAS (Movimiento al Socialismo [Movement for Socialism]).



Figure 10: Screenshot from pages sharing content targeting Bolivia’s Evo Morales and his political party, MAS. Post reads “Evo Morales, ‘splattered’ in the corruption scandal in Bolivia” (Source: Facebook)

The page “Prohibido olvidar” (“Forbidden to Forget”), with 524 likes and 595 followers, primarily shared content about the 2019 electoral fraud allegations that ultimately prompted Morales to resign. Specifically, it posted content alleging that Morales committed electoral fraud in the 2019 Bolivian elections, though none of the posts received large engagement.



Figure 11: A post shared by “Prohibido olvidar” reads “A Bolivian prosecutor opens a case against Evo Morales for election fraud.” (Source: Facebook)

One of the Bolivia-related assets, named “Bolificado,” presented itself as a fact-checking outlet, debunking supposedly false claims targeting Jeanine Áñez and her political coalition. One post specifically contradicted two Bolivian fact-checking organizations, Agencia de Noticias Fides and ChequeaBolivia, who both **verified** that the campaign for “Alianza Juntos” (the political campaign of Jeanine Anez) had distributed face masks and dog food with the Juntos logo to flood victims in the town of Tiquipaya. Bolificado labeled the Tweet as “Fake News”. From February 6, 2020, when the page was created, until March 9, the date of its last post, the page posted only six times and only managed to gain 14 followers. However, the contradictory fake news post garnered 598 reactions, 110 comments and 82 shares.

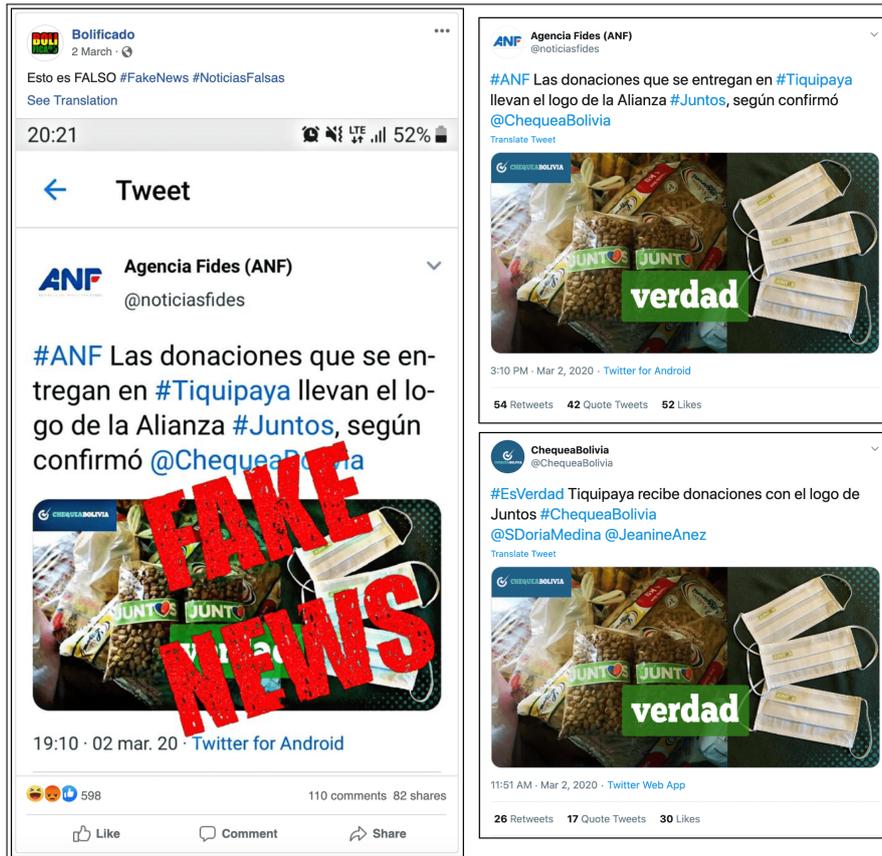


Figure 12: Left: Screenshot from the removed page Bolificado, labeling a Tweet from the fact-checking organization Agencia de Noticias Fides as “Fake News”. Right: Original fact check posts from ANF and ChequeaBolivia labeling the story as “true” (Source: Facebook, @noticiasfides, @ChequeaBolivia)

5 The Venezuela Operation

5.1 Political Context

Venezuelan President Hugo Chávez died in office in 2013 after 14 years as head of state. His vice president and anointed successor Nicolás Maduro won a narrow victory in the required presidential race held a month after Chávez’s death, and **experts speculated** the decline of the Socialist Party’s political control in Venezuela. However, despite a mounting economic crisis, international sanctions and millions of citizens fleeing the country, the party has retained control, and Maduro’s government has become a major force on social media.

Maduro ran for a second presidential term in 2018 in a highly contested election. The election was marred by the lowest voter turnout in the country’s history and allegations of vote buying and fraud. The OAS Secretary General called the election a “**farce**.” In January 2019, National Assembly leader Juan Guaidó declared himself interim president of Venezuela. While over 50 countries recognize Guaidó as President, the military remains loyal to Maduro. Guaidó’s international support has posed little domestic threat to the Maduro regime, and as a result the Venezuelan opposition has become increasingly fractured, with no sole leader.

5.2 Themes and Tactics

The Venezuela-focused assets in the takedown primarily promoted Venezuelan opposition leaders, including former presidential candidate Henrique Capriles, Vente Venezuela opposition party coordinator María Corina Machado, and Juan Guaidó, president of the National Assembly who is also recognized by over 50 countries as Venezuela's interim president. In 2020, however, the assets displayed a shift in tone toward Guaidó and his political allies, increasingly publishing more negative content targeting them. This shift reflects the political shift that happened between 2019 and 2020 in opposition leaders such as **Capriles** and **Machado**, who have grown increasingly critical of Guaidó.



Figure 13: Screenshot from the removed page Venezuela está con María Corina from 2019 supporting the Vente Venezuela opposition party coordinator María Corina Machado. (Source: Facebook)

Of the CLS Strategies staff whose names are in the dataset, several list in their company biographies that they have previously worked on campaigns related to Venezuela.

The content of the assets matched Capriles' position against the Maduro regime and opposition leaders who support Guaidó, such as Guaidó's political mentor Leopoldo López and the leader of the Democratic Action Party, Henry Ramos Allup.

Guaidó declared himself the legitimate president of Venezuela on January 23, 2019. As one of the regime's responses, Maduro called for protests against Guaidó. The assets in this network defended Guaidó during this period. For instance, the Instagram account @FrenteLibreVzla **posted** a video describing

Guaidó as a “new leader” who would lead the country to freedom. The Facebook page FAN Chavista, with 17,391 likes and 20,344 followers, amplified U.S. President Donald Trump’s statements supporting “the young Venezuelan leader” on February 19, 2019. At the time, Capriles told Venezuelan local radio station Onda that he backed Guaidó’s self-proclamation and claimed the opposition was “united” at that moment.



Figure 14: Instagram account @FrenteLibreVzla posted a video (top) describing how Guaidó would lead the country to freedom while the Facebook page Fan Chavista amplified U.S. President Donald Trump’s statements supporting Guaidó. (Source: Facebook)

On May 17, 2020, representatives aligned with the opposition to Maduro — but not in support of Guaidó — **claimed** that Capriles had withdrawn his support for Guaidó. On August 24, 2020, Capriles confirmed this position when he

claimed an alternate strategy from the one proposed by Guaidó was needed to oust Maduro from power. During 2020, posts by the network amplified this negative sentiment against Guaidó. For instance, FAN Chavista posted a video on May 5, claiming López, Guaidó’s political mentor, “despised the soldiers” and was corrupt.



Figure 15: Screenshots of the video undermining Leopoldo López, which claimed López was corrupt. (Source: Facebook)

The researchers also found several social media accounts on other platforms that were linked to the Facebook assets and similarly used to amplify content. The Twitter account [@PlanGarra](#), which was primarily dedicated to defending [embattled Venezuelan food company](#) Empresas Polar, used the same picture profile as removed Facebook account Andrés Gómez. [@PlanGarra](#) also [retweeted a video](#) that showed Diosdado Cabello, Nicolás Maduro’s second-in-command, inviting people to vandalize Empresas Polar’s facilities. The video closed with a logo of [Jovenes por la Libertad](#), one of the removed Instagram accounts. Venezuelan independent media Efecto Cocuyo [published](#) on May 2, 2020, an analysis of the Maduro regime attacks against Empresas Polar. Efecto Cocuyo said Empresas Polar is one of the main companies in the country and by the year 2015 “contributed 3 percent to the country’s GDP.” Efecto Cocuyo also showed one of the Maduro regime’s most recent moves consists of putting pressure on the company by controlling the sales prices of its products during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Similarly, the removed Instagram account [@FrenteLibreVzla](#) used the same profile picture as the suspended Twitter account [@FrenteAmplioVE](#). This Instagram account, which supported Venezuelan opposition leaders Maria Corina Machado and Juan Guaidó, garnered a high number of followers for its relatively low volume of activity. The account published only [seven posts](#) during a single month — January 15 to February 18, 2019 — and amassed 1,805 followers as of August 31, 2020.

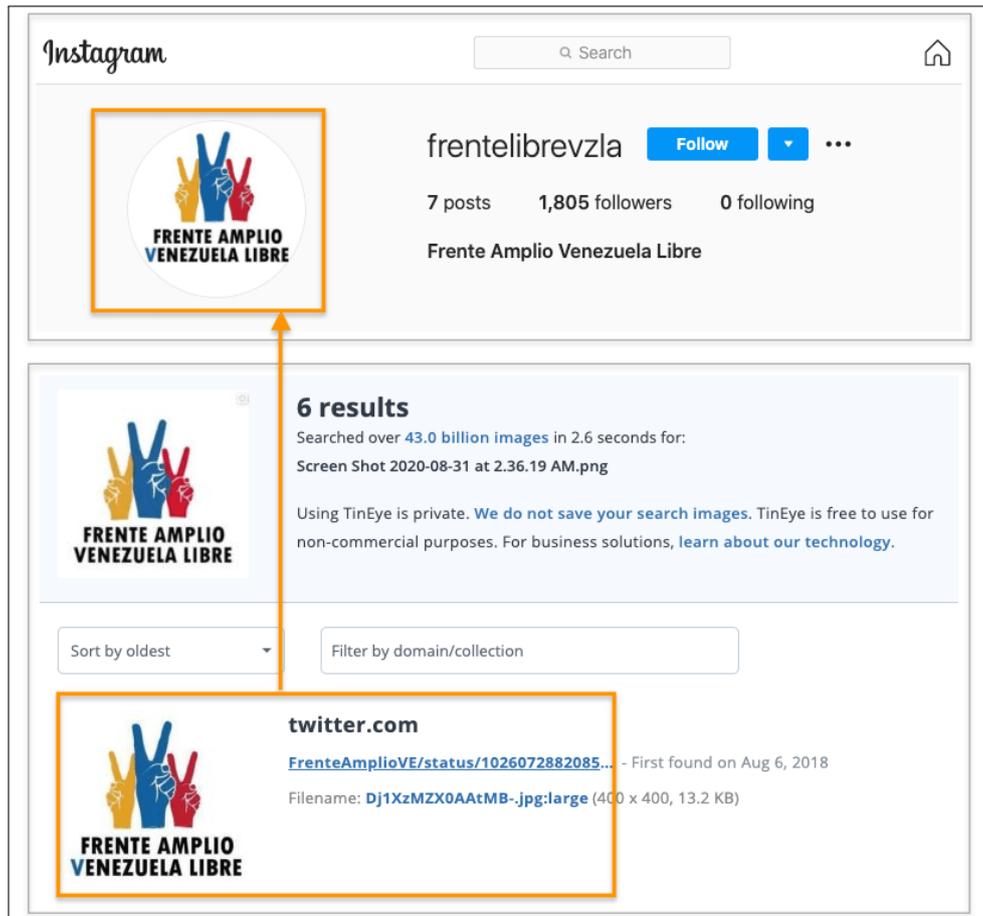


Figure 16: The removed account @FrenteLibreVzla used the same picture profile of the suspended Twitter account @FrenteAmplioVE, according to a search using TinEye. (Source: Instagram, top; TinEye, bottom)

The website of the opposition coalition platform **Frente Amplio Venezuela Libre** used a similar logo to @FrenteLibreVzla on its linked accounts on **Instagram** and **Twitter**.

6 Conclusion

The demand for strategic communication firms to run political influence campaigns is high, signalling a new trend in the online political sphere. Platforms must adapt to this changing nature and be prepared for greater and more sophisticated operations in the future. Similarly, strategic communication firms must be aware of potential employee bias and involvement in online campaigns and balance the risk of personal accounts being held accountable by platforms enforcing the ban on coordinated inauthentic behavior.

The Stanford Internet Observatory is a cross-disciplinary program of research, teaching and policy engagement for the study of abuse in current information technologies, with a focus on social media. The Observatory was created to learn about the abuse of the internet in real time, and to translate our research discoveries into training and policy innovations for the public good.