

Beijing-linked disinformation campaign targets rare-earth mineral industry

Article

The news: A pro-People's Republic of China online group is targeting Western companies mining rare-earth minerals with a disinformation campaign.

Cybersecurity firm **Mandiant** released a [report](#) indicating that Beijing-linked **Dragonbridge** used thousands of fake social media accounts on **Facebook**, **TikTok**, and **Twitter** to spread disinformation, [per](#) The Register.

- The US Department of Defense is investigating Dragonbridge's campaign against Australia-based **Lynas Rare Earths**, which has a **\$30 million** Pentagon contract to build a plant in Texas. The contract is part of an effort to boost mineral production in the US.
- The disinformation campaign began earlier this year and involved **posts from fake accounts about the planned Lynas facility exposing residents to radioactive contamination, cancer risks, gene mutation, and infant deformities.**
- There were also negative posts about President Biden invoking the [Defense Production Act](#) to secure minerals for domestic energy security.
- Dragonbridge has also targeted Canadian mining company **Appia Rare Earths** and US-based **Uranium Corp** and **USA Rare Earth** with fake news and negative posts.
- Recent campaigns coincided with Appia announcing its discovery of a zone bearing rare-earth minerals in Saskatchewan and the company's plan to build a processing facility in Oklahoma.

How we got here: Rare-earth minerals are crucial components of many EV batteries, electronics, and renewable energy systems, but mineral deposits aren't evenly distributed across the globe. The recent rise in EV adoption and interest in renewable energy has spurred a mineral arms race.

- China holds a global monopoly on the rare-earth mineral industry and accounts for **70% to 88% of global production**, [per](#) Forbes.
- The Dragonbridge campaign indicates that there's political interest in preserving China's position as the global leader in rare-earth minerals.
- This is hardly the first instance of [disinformation](#) spread through social media. Dragonbridge is also responsible for a campaign claiming that COVID-19 originated in the US. It has reportedly been active since at least 2019, across **30 social media platforms** and **40 websites** in multiple languages.

The bigger picture: Although Mandiant's report indicates that Dragonbridge's latest campaigns were unsuccessful in getting Texans to protest the mining facility, the efforts have still likely planted seeds within the minds of some people.

- The campaigns are indicative of a weakness that will continue to be exploited until companies crack down on malicious social media accounts that don't represent protected free speech.
- As other countries also strive for energy independence, we'll likely see these types of campaigns proliferate elsewhere.
- While Dragonbridge's posts are false, environmental concerns about the mining of rare-earth minerals remain. More recycling and diversifying the types of components used could help ease the challenges.

What Most Affects US Social Media Users' Decision to Engage* with Ads or Sponsored Content on Social Media Platforms?

% of respondents, June 2021

The platform protects my privacy and data



The platform shows me deceptive content (e.g., disinformation, fake news, scams, or clickbait)



The platform offers me a safe environment to participate and post (e.g., to read, write, watch, comment on, or like posts)



The platform shows me annoying ads



The platform shows me relevant ads



■ Extremely impactful
 ■ Very impactful
 ■ Moderately impactful
 ■ Slightly impactful
 ■ Not at all impactful

Note: n=1,730 ages 18-75; number may not add up to 100% due to rounding; *view, watch, click, share, comment

Source: Insider Intelligence, "US Digital Trust Survey," Q2 2021

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