

# Covid-19

## Disinformation

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Elise Thomas

## Twisting the truth: ongoing inauthentic activity promoting Falun Gong, the *Epoch Times* and Truth Media targets Australians on Facebook

### Introduction

This short investigation examines two suspicious Facebook pages that promote content supportive of Falun Gong and its associated media entities, including the *Epoch Times* and New Tang Dynasty (NTD) media, yet don't declare any direct affiliation. Both pages display behaviours reminiscent of two networks previously removed from the platform, which Facebook attributed as linked to [Truth Media](#) and [Epoch Media Group](#). One of the pages is run primarily by Australian-based moderators, while the other is run from Vietnam. These pages are using different strategies, including paid advertisements, systematically sharing content into Australian Facebook groups (including fringe and conspiracy groups), and attempting to drive traffic to *Epoch Times* and Falun Gong-affiliated sites. Despite the different approaches, however, the pages are broadly aligned in their messaging and seek to influence Australians on a range of issues, including Australia's relationship with China, opinions of the Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC), and the leadership of the Victorian state government.

Falun Gong and its supporters in Australia are entitled to participate in the national conversation, including advocating for their own interests and expressing their criticisms of media and government. However, the use of covert tactics and inauthentic social media activity in an effort to conceal who is behind those efforts isn't acceptable in democratic societies such as Australia and may constitute a violation of the social media platform's policies.

### Background to previous inauthentic Facebook activity linked to Falun Gong

Falun Gong is a religious movement with members and supporters around the globe. The movement's followers face harassment and persecution in China. Internationally, Falun Gong has been [linked](#) to a major multimedia push against the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), including through media outlets such as the *Epoch Times* and NTD TV.

The *Epoch Times* and associated actors have been implicated in multiple inauthentic influence efforts. In July 2020, Facebook [removed](#) a network of hundreds of what it described as 'a combination of authentic, compromised and fake' accounts, pages and groups tied to Epoch Media Group, and which violated Facebook's policies against foreign interference.

The network was specifically linked to Truth Media—a multinational and multilingual media company that offers the 'light of truth' in its reporting. The pages examined in this report show similarities with previous pages connected to the company and have shared content that's clearly branded with the Truth Media logo.

These assets were used to 'drive people to off-platform sites, comment on their own and other people's content, and manage Groups and Pages posing as regional news entities ... and [spamming] Groups with their content, likely using automation.' A more detailed report by [Graphika](#) found that the network sought to influence Facebook users in

multiple countries around the world on political and social issues, in alignment with the broader goals and interests of the Falun Gong movement.

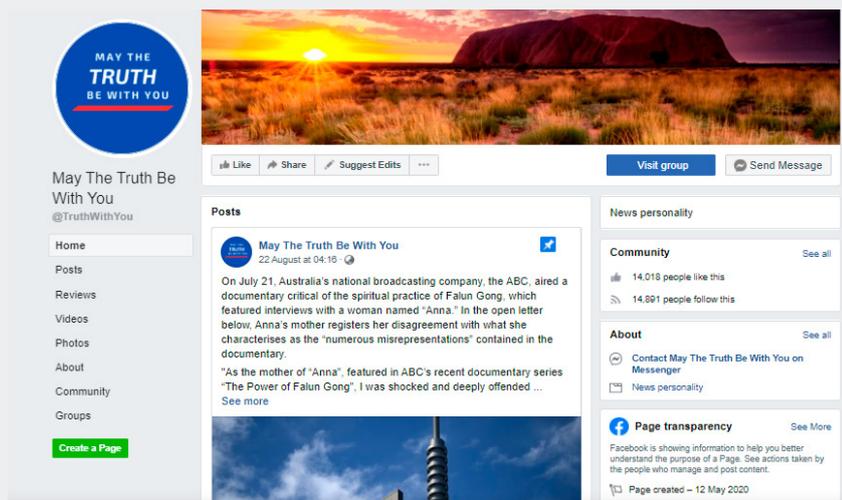
This recent takedown follows the [earlier removal](#) of a similar, larger network in 2019, which Facebook attributed to Epoch Media Group and ‘individuals in Vietnam working on its behalf’.

The pages examined in this report appear highly likely to be a continuation of this inauthentic activity, specifically aimed at Australian audiences.

## May the Truth Be With You

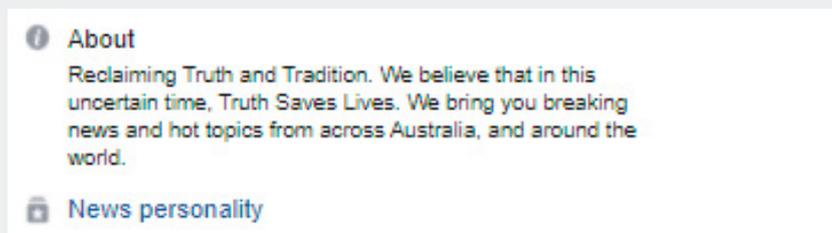
May the Truth Be With You is a Facebook page created in May 2020. As of 26 August 2020, it had 14,892 followers and used a picture of Uluru as its cover image (Figure 1). According to Facebook Transparency data, 49 of its 50 page moderators are based in Australia; the remaining moderator is in Taiwan. The page is also linked to a May the Truth Be With You Facebook group, with 130 members.

Figure 1: May the Truth Be With You Facebook page, captured 26 August 2020



The page’s ‘About’ section doesn’t acknowledge any link with Falun Gong, the *Epoch Times* or other associated media entities (Figure 2).

Figure 2: May the Truth Be With You ‘About’ section, captured 26 August 2020



The page shares a large amount of *Epoch Times*, China In Focus and other media content associated with Falun Gong. It provides daily updates on a currently ongoing protest outside the offices of the ABC, which recently aired investigative journalism pieces on the Falun Gong movement. The updates are posted alongside links to Falun Dafa’s website, *Minghui.org*.

Some of the Facebook users sharing these updates appear to be based in Vietnam (Figure 3). While of course this may be authentic and legitimate activity, when combined with the history of Falun Gong-related inauthentic activity linked to Vietnam as discussed above, it does raise questions.

Figure 3: 'Live update' on Falun Gong protest outside ABC offices, linking to *Minghui.org* and shared by a Facebook user who gives their location as Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam. Captured 26 August 2020



May The Truth Be With You  
5d · 🌐

#LiveUpdate

Day 30 Falun Gong Practitioners Peaceful Protest In Front of ABC Sydney Office.

Weather: Sunny

Temperature : 18°C

Falun Gong is an advanced practice of self-cultivation based on the Buddha School of teachings, founded by Mr. Li Hongzhi, the practice's master.

It is a discipline in which "assimilation to the highest qualities of the universe—Zhen, Shan, Ren (Truthfulness, Compassion, Forbearance)—is the foundation of practice. Practice is guided by these supreme qualities, and based on the very laws which underlie the development of the cosmos."

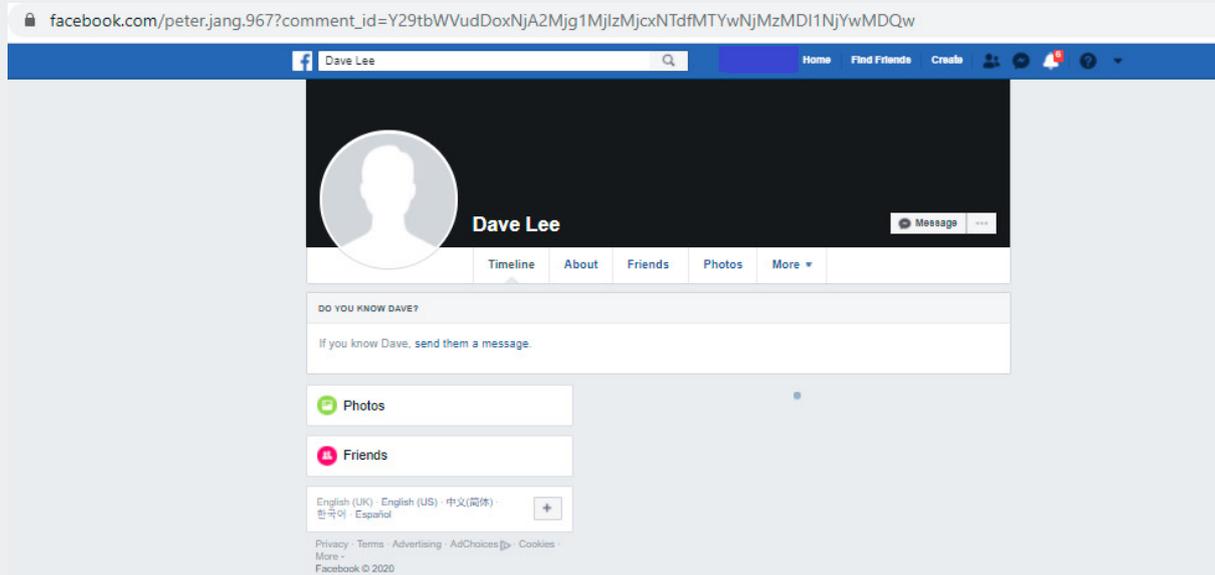
<https://en.minghui.org/cc/15/>

👍 Like Page

👍❤️ 5

Some of the other accounts commenting on and sharing May the Truth Be With You's content also seem questionable. 'Dave Lee', 'Carole Johnson' and 'Zorana Pikameter', for example, who occasionally comment in grammatically incorrect English on May The Truth Be With You's posts, have no friends, no profile pictures, and no indications of organic activity (Figure 4). Dave also seems to have been originally named Peter.

Figure 4: 'Dave Lee' Facebook account, captured 26 August 2020. Note the name 'Peter Jang' in the Facebook account URL



## Advertising campaign targeting the ABC and the Victorian Government

May the Truth Be With You has also been running a number of paid Facebook advertisements targeting Australians (Figure 5). This includes ads based on Falun Gong and Falun Dafa content.

Figure 5: Facebook ads run by May the Truth Be With You, captured 26 August 2020

The screenshot shows a Facebook Ad Manager interface. At the top, there are filters: 'Filter by: Australia', 'Impressions by date', and 'Platform'. Below the filters, it says 'Launched in August 2020'. There are three ad cards displayed:

- Ad 1:** Status: Active. Started running on 22 Aug 2020. ID: 234959924414058. Advertiser: May The Truth Be With You (Sponsored). Text: 'Everybody needs a hug. This can be our inspo for this uncertain time. To support and care for each other.' Image: A person in a white shirt and dark pants hugging another person in a dark shirt. Like count: 14,015.
- Ad 2:** Status: Active. Started running on 21 Aug 2020. ID: 2980680675477057. Advertiser: May The Truth Be With You (Sponsored). Text: 'In just 20 years, hundreds of millions of people have benefited. Proved: This ancient practice can heal incurable diseases and improve people's morality. A wonderful introduction to Falun Gong (Falun Dafa). Falun Dafa is practiced by over 100 million people in every country around t...'. Image: A group of people sitting on the grass outdoors. Button: 'See ad details'.
- Ad 3:** Status: Inactive. 19 Aug 2020-23 Aug 2020. ID: 1227166547627452. Advertiser: May The Truth Be With You (Sponsored). Text: 'The New York Times covered up Stalin's crime on Ukraine during the 30s; And now, the ABC is showing clear signs of aiding Communist China government with reporting fake news in this 21st century; ...'. Image: A group of people in yellow costumes holding a yellow banner with Chinese characters '法轮大法' and 'Falun Dafa'. Note: 'This ad ran without a disclaimer.' Button: 'See summary details'.

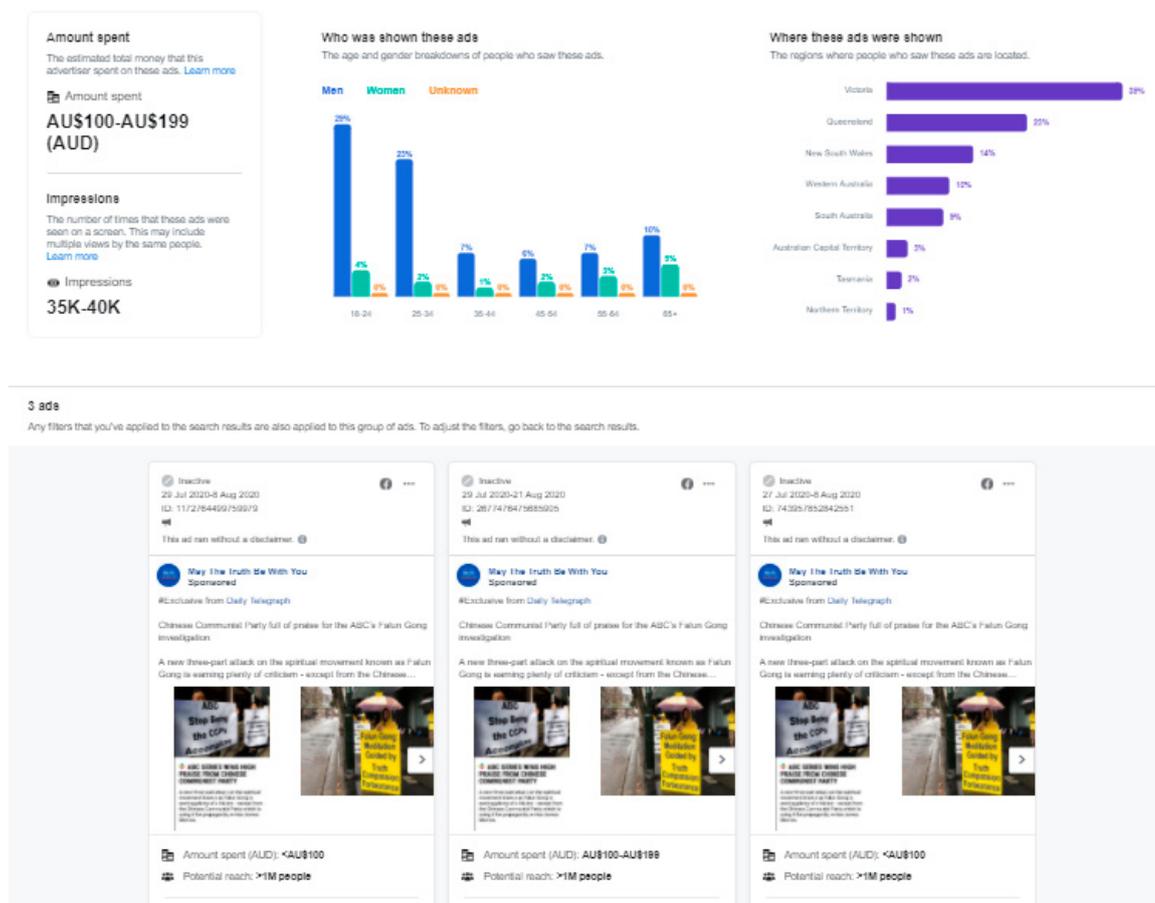
It also includes ads specifically targeting the ABC and the Victorian Government.

In July 2020, an [ABC investigation](#) raised questions about unethical, exploitative and harmful practices allegedly associated with Falun Gong. Falun Gong and its supporters have pushed back aggressively against the ABC’s reporting both in the [media](#) and on the streets outside the ABC’s offices, as May the Truth Be With You has so faithfully chronicled.

Facebook’s Ad Library shows that, since the ABC investigation aired, May the Truth Be With You has run at least 10 paid advertisements (including multiple ads with the same copy) attacking the ABC and accusing it of being infiltrated by the CCP. According to Facebook’s data, these ads have collectively reached between 75,000 and 91,000 Australian Facebook users, at a cost of somewhere between \$300 and \$700.<sup>1</sup>

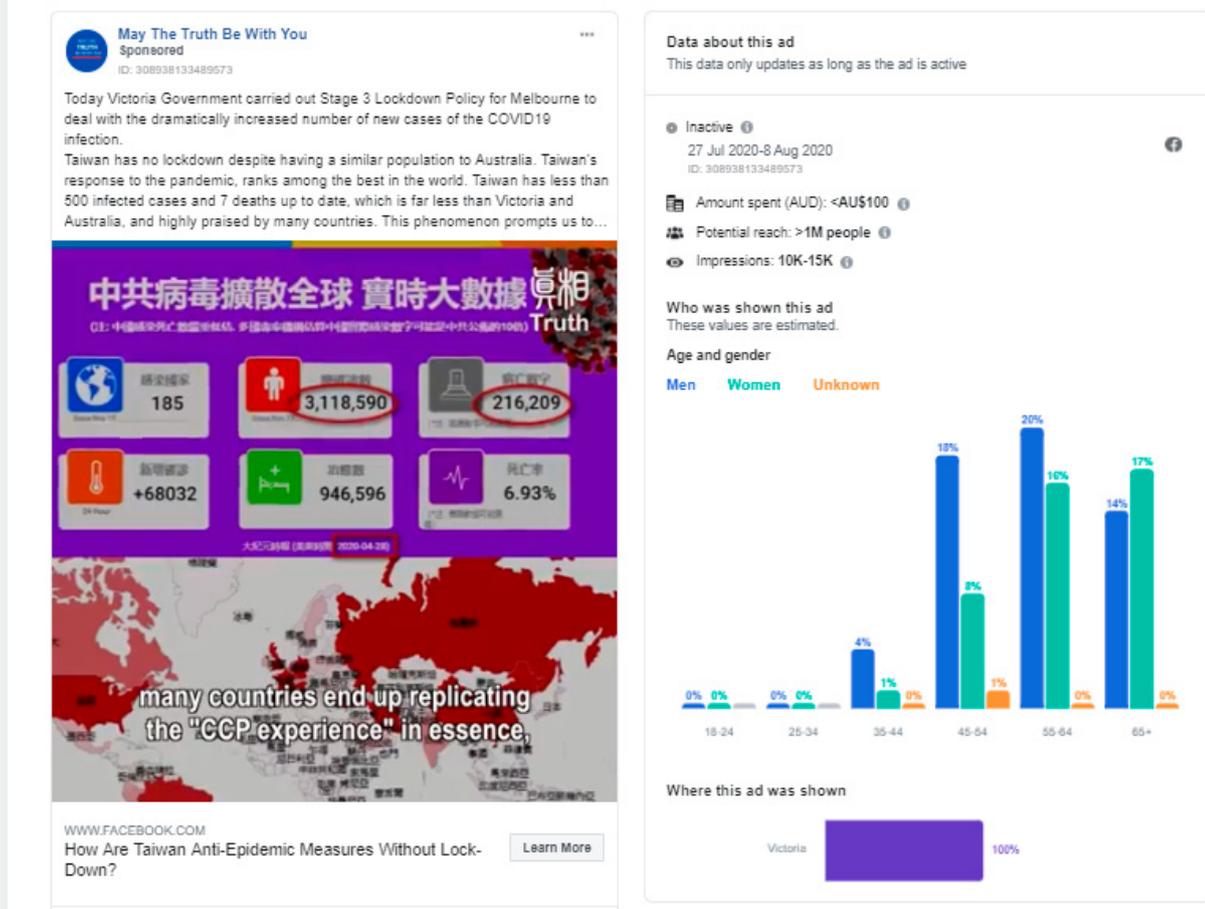
The copy for these ads is adapted from mainstream media coverage critical of the ABC, including material from [Business Insider](#), [The Spectator](#) and the [Daily Telegraph](#) (Figure 6).

**Figure 6: Screenshot of Facebook Ad Library data for May the Truth Be With You ad based on a *Daily Telegraph* article. The page ran three versions of the ad from 27 July to 21 August, reaching an estimated 35,000–40,000 people**



May the Truth Be With You has also paid for advertisements targeted specifically at Victorians and that are implicitly critical of the Victorian Government’s handling of the Covid-19 crisis. In one, which compares Victoria’s lockdown to Taiwan’s management of the crisis, the logo for Truth Media can clearly be seen (Figure 7).

Figure 7: May the Truth Be With You advertisement and data. Note the Truth Media logo in the upper right corner of the advertisement

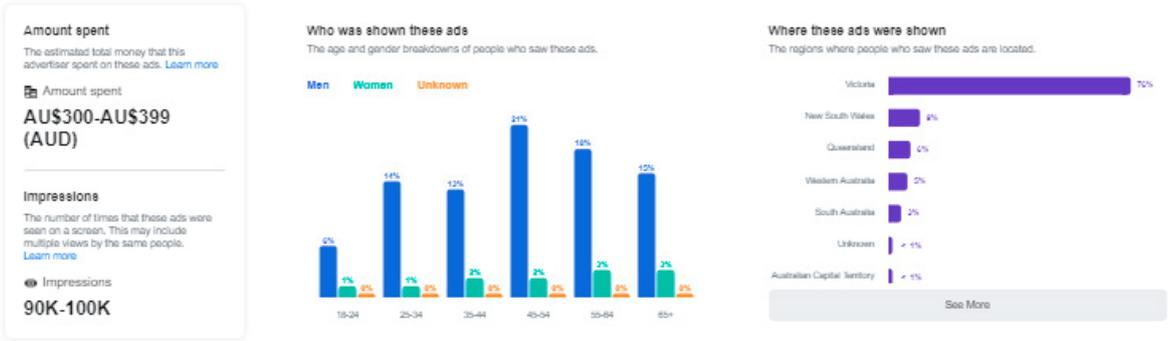


Another ad, which was run five times between 24 July and 7 August and reached up to 100,000 Australians, 78% of whom were in Victoria, paired an NTD TV documentary about 'the CCP method' with text referencing the [controversial Belt and Road agreement](#) between the Victorian and Chinese governments (Figure 8). NTD is a media company with [strong links](#) to the Falun Gong movement in the US.

**Figure 8: Facebook Ad Library data for May the Truth Be With You ad based on a documentary from Falun Gong-affiliated media, NTD TV**

**Summary data**

Advertisers often use the same image or video and text to create ad campaigns with different start dates, locations or budgets. This section contains the collective data for 5 ads.



**5 ads**

Any filters that you've applied to the search results are also applied to this group of ads. To adjust the filters, go back to the search results.

Three identical ad cards are shown. Each card includes the following text:

**May the Truth Be With You**  
Sponsored

Victoria has signed BRG with the Chinese Communist Party (CCP). However, the world including Australia does not know much about the CCP. Let's explore why the CCP has lied, is lying, and will continue to lie to protect its regime, and how it has been attempting to deceive, infiltrate, and dominate the world.

Originating in China, the coronavirus got out of control because...

The video thumbnails feature a red background with a hand holding a coin and the text "DECEIVE INfiltrate DOMINATE" and "The CCP Method".

Because the majority of May the Truth Be With You's page administrators are based in Australia, it isn't clear that inauthentic activity would also be a violation of Facebook's foreign interference policies. However, it does appear likely that this is an organised, inauthentic and funded effort to influence Australians in support of Falun Gong's goals, including targeting Falun Gong's perceived critics and opponents, and may constitute a violation of Facebook's policies.

## China Declassified

China Declassified is a page created on 7 August 2020 (Figure 9). Facebook's Transparency data shows that the page is run by a user in Vietnam, where earlier inauthentic activity linked to Falun Gong, the *Epoch Times* and Truth Media was based.

Figure 9: Page transparency pane for China Declassified, captured 2 September 2020

The screenshot shows the Facebook page transparency pane for 'China Declassified'. The page name is '@ChinaDeclassified'. The page was created on 7 August. The page name has not changed, and it has been merged with 0 other pages. The primary country/region location of people who manage this page is Vietnam (1). The page is not currently running ads. The page has a 'Close' button and a 'Find support or report Page' link.

**Page transparency summary**  
Facebook is showing information to help you better understand the purpose of a Page. See actions taken by the people who manage and post content. [Learn More](#)

**Page history**

- Page created on **7 August** – China Declassified
- Page name has not changed
- Merged with **0** other Pages. [See More](#)

**People who manage this Page**

Primary country/region location of people who manage this Page includes:

**Vietnam (1)**

**Ads from this Page**

This Page is not currently running ads. [Go to Ad Library](#)

[Find support or report Page](#) [Close](#)

The page appears likely to be the second generation of an earlier page, also called [China Declassified](#), which was deleted by Facebook. This page had been identified for [spreading fake news](#) originating with the Falun Gong-affiliated NTD TV network. It isn't clear from either the July 2020 Facebook Coordinated Inauthentic Behaviour or Graphika reports whether the original China Declassified was removed as part of the July takedown of *Epoch Times* linked inauthentic pages, or was removed separately.

At the time it was removed, the original China Declassified page appears to have had almost 30,000 followers. The new China Declassified page had gained 913 followers in 19 days as of 26 August (Figure 10).

Figure 10: China Declassified Facebook page, captured 26 August 2020



As with *May the Truth Be With You*, China Declassified doesn't acknowledge any link to Falun Gong, the *Epoch Times* or other associated media entities in its description. Again, the use and capitalisation of 'Truth' is circumstantial, but does bring the Truth Media operation to mind (Figure 11).

Figure 11: China Declassified 'About' section, captured 26 August 2020

## The Truth can make a difference!

CHINA DECLASSIFIED · MONDAY, AUGUST 17, 2020 ·

Standing up to the CCP will land you on the right side of history.

The Truth can make a difference!

The page shares almost exclusively Falun Gong-associated media content, including *Epoch Times* television shows such as *CrossRoads*, *American Thought Leaders*, *China In Focus* and *China Uncensored* (Figure 12).<sup>2</sup> This content is often shared with links to subscribe to the official media YouTube channels, to donate or sign up to their Patreon, and to watch *Agenda: Grinding America Down*, a documentary that alleges that America has been the target of a secret communist infiltration plot.

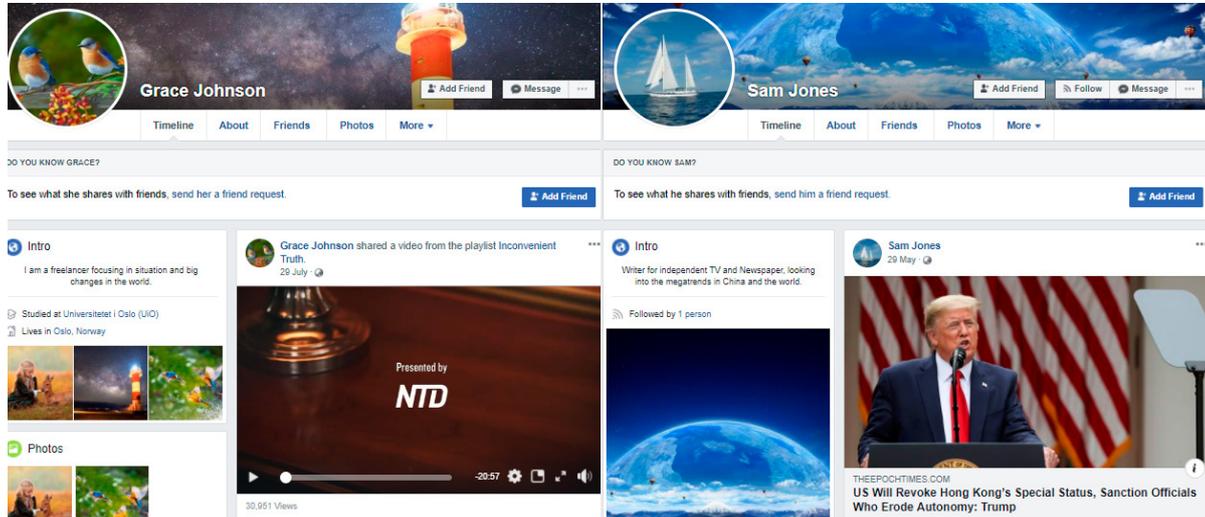
Figure 12: China Declassified Facebook posts sharing Falun Gong-affiliated links, captured 26 August 2020

The image shows two Facebook posts from the page 'China Declassified'. The left post is titled 'His new book is titled "The Permanent Coup: How Enemies Foreign and Domestic Targeted the American President."' and includes a video thumbnail of the book cover. The right post is titled 'Three Gorges Dam Tested as China Floods Worsen' and includes a video thumbnail with the text 'AS FLOODING INTENSIFIES IN CHINA'. Both posts contain several links to 'rejectccp.com' and 'endccp.com', and a link to a petition. The left post has 13 likes and 8 shares, while the right post has 32 shares.

The posts also include links to the Falun Gong and *Epoch Times*-associated domains *rejectccp.com* and *endccp.com*. Driving traffic to these domains was also a prominent feature of the inauthentic activity removed in July 2020, and the domains are discussed in detail in the [Graphika report](#).

As with *May the Truth Be With You*, a number of accounts that regularly engage with China Declassified's content appear to be suspicious. For example, the accounts 'Sam Jones' and 'Grace Johnson', which have liked and shared many of China Declassified's posts, both became active in early 2020; their public activity is dominated by shares of Falun Gong-affiliated media content (alongside some mainstream media articles presenting news that's critical of the CCP); and they show no other signs of authenticity, such as original posts or personal photos (Figure 13). They also have notably similar bio descriptions.

Figure 13: 'Grace Johnson' and 'Sam Jones' accounts, captured 26 August 2020



As mentioned above, China Declassified shares Falun Gong-related content *almost* exclusively: the exceptions include a small number of posts that appear to be original content. This includes a [long post](#) on 24 August criticising Victorian Premier Daniel Andrews for his alleged 'intimate relationship' with the Chinese Government (Figure 14). The post ends by suggesting that Victoria's second Covid-19 outbreak may be divine punishment for the Victorian Government's support of the CCP. This post has so far received a very low level of engagement.

Figure 14: China Declassified Facebook post criticising Daniel Andrews and the Victorian Government, captured 27 August 2020



Other Australian-focused political content includes sharing a recording of an online event from the Menzies Research Centre with Greg Sheridan (Figure 15). In the accompanying Facebook posts, moments from the conversation have been selectively highlighted to emphasise commentary on Australia's vulnerabilities to CCP interference.

Figure 15: China Declassified Facebook post on 28 August 2020, captured 31 August 2020

Like Follow Share ...

The Australian's Greg Sheridan joins Nick Cater on Watercooler to discuss why values matter in the China debate and why so-called China experts are consistently wrong

Interview by the Menzies Research Centre with Greg Sheridan, the first correspondent The Australian newspaper ever sent to China.

3:13 There was almost a universal certainty among the China "watchers" in the west had in the 1980s, that with the economic liberalisation would come with a democratic opening up.

6:43 Don't trust China "watchers", whatever they tell you, the only thing you can be confident of is it's likely to be wrong.

9:44 The CCP is doing things which hurt our national interests which we have to resist.

13:44 It is a failure of all governments that we haven't attracted more Indian and other trade.

15:07 Greg Sheridan wrote a front page story for the Australian in 1985 titled "The lies they tell our children".

16:53 The universities today in Australia are in a shocking state with their leadership, with the quality of their curriculum, with their dependence on an authoritarian, quasi-totalitarian government to give them money, grace and favour.

17:38 Thoughts on Trump and Biden

💎BEST DOCUMENTARY AGENDA Grinding America Down  
<https://youtu.be/dknhWw4iZJ0>

💎Sign the petition to investigate, condemn, and reject the Chinese Communist Party  
<https://rejectccp.com>  
<https://endccp.com>

## Seeding content into Australian Facebook groups

China Declassified isn't currently running significant paid advertising campaigns beyond simply promoting itself, perhaps in an effort to regain the followers it lost when the original page was removed (Figure 16).

**Figure 16: China Declassified promotional page**



However, China Declassified's content is being seeded into a range of Australian and international Facebook groups. This appears to include a systematic, organised effort from a small number of Vietnamese-linked accounts, as well as organic activity from ordinary users. The Facebook groups being targeted include local community groups, ethnic minority groups and conspiracy groups.

For example, on 10 August, China Declassified shared a video attacking the ABC and alleging that it works for the CCP (Figure 17). Once again, the Truth Media logo is clearly visible.

Figure 17: China Declassified video shared on Facebook on 10 August, captured 16 August 2020. Note Truth Media logo in upper right corner



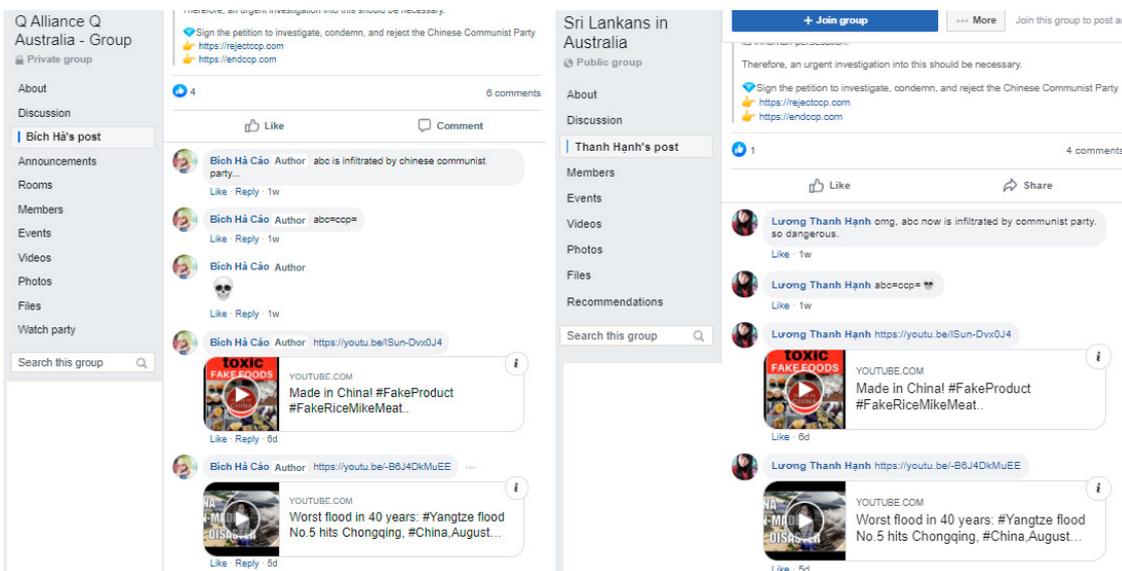
A week later, on 17 August, Facebook user Bích Hà Cáo shared the post and video into an Australian group dedicated to the QAnon conspiracy (Figure 18). This appears to have been Bích Hà Cáo's first and so far only post in the group, indicating that they aren't a regular member. They also commented six times on their own post, including sharing more Falun Gong-affiliated content.

Figure 18: Post and comments in Q Alliance Q Australia group, captured 26 August 2020

The same video was also shared into other groups, including Aussie Humour Incorporated, Indian Community in Australia/ NewZealand, Melbourne Indian Community MIC, World Boycott of China Goods, Murders in Australia, Indians In Hobart, Orchid Growers Australia, Sri Lankans in Australia, Fiji Indians – Brisbane Melbourne Sydney Australia, Asian Alliance Against ChiNazi, Australia-wide Community Board No Rules and Media Updates For NRI in Australia.

In addition to sharing the video, the accounts have also made almost identical comments in reply to their own posts (Figure 19).

**Figure 19: (L) Bích Hà Cáo's replies to their own post in Q Alliance Q Australia Group and (R) Lương Thanh Hạnh's replies to their own post in Sri Lankans in Australia. Captured 26 August 2019**



As was the case with Bích Hà Cáo, the accounts sharing the videos don't appear to be regular members of the groups or members of, for example, the Sri Lankan Australian community. Most of the accounts have been active only since early 2020. They appear to be using stock photographs and show no signs of authentic activity. It seems likely that these are inauthentic accounts, possibly created to compensate for the accounts removed by Facebook in late 2019, and that they're being used in a coordinated effort to promote pro-Falun Gong messages and to undermine perceived opponents of Falun Gong.

Other early posts on China Declassified have been shared in what appears to be a similarly coordinated way, including through specific targeting of ethnic minority communities in Australia. As the page has gained more followers, more organic activity and sharing also appear to be taking place.

In light of the fact that China Declassified is run by a user in Vietnam, and a number of the accounts engaging in apparent inauthentic activity related to the page appear to also have links to Vietnam, this may constitute a violation of Facebook's policies against foreign interference.

## Discussion

This short investigation highlights continuing inauthentic activity disseminating Falun Gong-affiliated content and displaying traits similar to previously removed networks that Facebook has linked to Epoch Media Group. The actors behind these pages are seeking to influence the perceptions of Australians on a range of political and politicised issues, including Australia's relationship with China, Australians' trust in their national broadcaster (the ABC), and the Victorian Government's handling of the Covid-19 outbreak.

This report lays out two different strategies aimed at influencing Australians: paid advertisements, and seeding content into Australian Facebook groups. The targeting of conspiracy groups and ethnic minority communities without disclosure of affiliations is particularly concerning.

Australian members and supporters of Falun Gong are entitled to press their case in public in Australia's national debate, including airing their grievances against the ABC and making criticisms of government and political figures. However, inauthentic and covert attempts to manipulate public opinion without a clear acknowledgement of who is behind those efforts don't support the open exchange of views or legitimate democratic debate. Covert influence by private organisations poses similar risks of distorting public debate as covert behaviour for this purpose by state actors, albeit on a smaller scale. State actors are now regulated by legislation in Australia, although private entities are subject only to platform policies.

## Notes

- 1 Facebook Ad Transparency data gives ranges rather than exact figures for either ad spend or ad reach, making it difficult to be more precise.
- 2 The *Epoch Times* also previously had a show named *Declassified* that focused on US politics, but it doesn't appear to have aired new episodes for at least two months.

## Acronyms and abbreviations

ABC	Australian Broadcasting Corporation
CCP	Chinese Communist Party
NTD	New Tang Dynasty

## About the author

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