

---

# The Monetization of Disinformation through Amazon: La Verdadera Izquierda

*"A good way to support us is to buy through  
our Amazon Associates link (...)  
All benefits will be directed  
towards patriotic causes"*

EU DisinfoLab  
OSINT INVESTIGATION

April 2020



## Table of Contents

<b>La Verdadera Izquierda, a disinformative and partisan blog.....</b>	<b>3</b>
Signatures and blog content .....	4
Impact.....	8
<b>The Network.....</b>	<b>9</b>
Facebook pages connected .....	9
<b>The Twitter network and Amazon.....</b>	<b>14</b>
<b>The Twitter accounts.....</b>	<b>14</b>
@Verdaderalzdqda .....	17
@Patria_Espana.....	18
@YoEstoyConVox (renamed @Jose_CasadoVOX) .....	18
Why is Polmoya is on this list? .....	20
@Sergarlo.....	21
Massively sharing monetised Amazon links .....	23
@ChollosDeHogar and @GangasAmazonEsp .....	23
@TotalTriatlon.....	25
Amazon links on @Sergarlo.....	25
Amazon links on @Patria_Espana .....	26
The Amazon links of @YoEstoyConVox / @Jose_CasadoVOX .....	32
Amazon links on @Verdaderalzdqda .....	36
An example of the amplification of Amazon links.....	36
The Amazon Associates program .....	39
What is the Amazon Associates program? .....	39
<b>Conclusion and Recommendations.....</b>	<b>44</b>

## La Verdadera Izquierda, a disinformative and partisan blog

Verdadera Izquierda ("True Left") ([verdaderaizquierda.blogspot.com](http://verdaderaizquierda.blogspot.com)) is a news blog created in October 2011. It first began as a Twitter account with the same name (@VerdaderaIzqda) created in June of the same year, with the stated goal of *"unmasking the lies of the left and socialism in this great country called Spain"*.



Figure 1 La Verdadera Izquierda first tweets, 22 June 2011 indicating its narrative

As one can see in the first blogposts or tweets, from the very beginning it positioned itself as an attacker of the left-wing parties – just a few months before the country's general elections were held on November 20, 2011.<sup>1</sup>

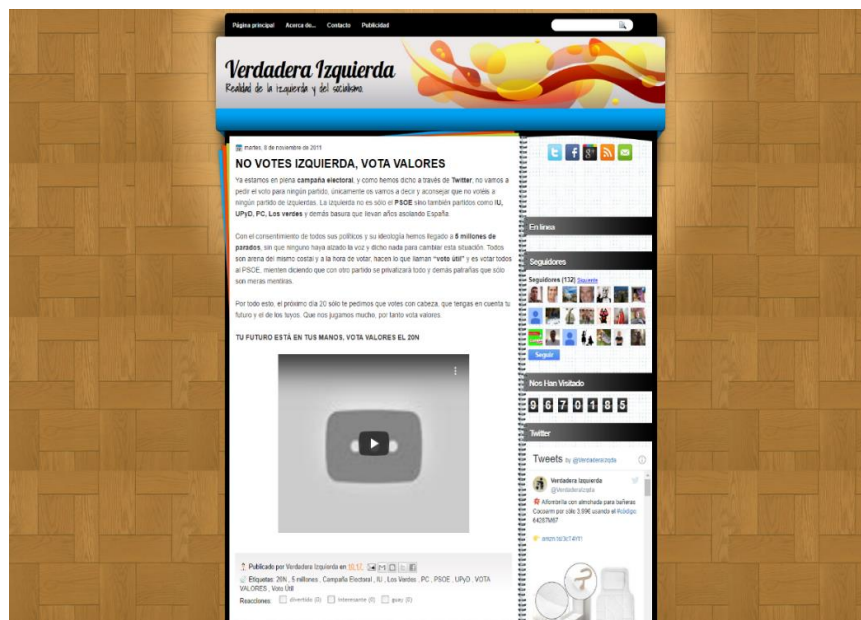


Figure 2 One of the first blog post of La Verdadera Izquierda, November 2011 calling on people not to vote for the left

<sup>1</sup><https://verdaderaizquierda.blogspot.com/2011/11/no-votes-izquierda-vota-valores.html> See also Blogspot 10 November 2011: "PSOE kills: 11M victims" <https://verdaderaizquierda.blogspot.com/2011/11/el-psoe-mata-los-muertos-del-11m.html#more>

Years later, in October 2017, its Facebook page was created. At the time of writing this report,<sup>2</sup> its Facebook page counts 4139 likes and 4285 followers. Both the blog and the social network accounts are still active today. We were able to draw out patterns from the websites, which informed our decision to launch an investigation:

- The dissemination of fake, biased and polarizing content;
- The opacity and lack of transparency about both creator(s) and the person(s) who manage the accounts and website, and
- The massive sharing of Amazon links, indicating a possible monetization of disinformation.

Around the time La Verdadera Izquierda (LVI) was created, the socialist government was being heavily criticized, heading to its defeat in the November 2011 elections,

On LVI's "about" page, it claims to *"want to make society see that there is nothing left of the values that were based on the same ideology, that at this moment there is only an old-fashioned sectarian left that refuses to evolve."* It goes on later to say: *"we denounce the bad deeds they carry out, which often do not appear in the media because they are controlled, we want to become a reading blog so that people know the "True Left".<sup>3</sup>*

## Signatures and blog content

Verdaderaizquierda.blogspot.com started by publishing very short texts, contributions that seemed to be from the creator/creators of the blog, but soon we began to see contributions from other bloggers and collaborators, as well as articles from other media or texts calling for events and demonstrations. Even "more original" formats appeared, such as competitions to choose "the fool of the quarter" with contenders from the Spanish left.

Among the signatures of the early days, we found a few such as "Zumalacárregui" (probably a pseudonym that refers to a Spanish Basque military man who was a Carlist general), @josecharlie2\_93, "El Barandillero" and other bloggers like @quiqueval,<sup>4</sup> @verdaderaizquierda also signs some articles, but their contributions disappear around 2015.<sup>5</sup>

The blog also syndicates content, replicating articles from other media, sometimes giving credit and indicating the source, but in most cases, it simply copy-pastes content without quoting the source. This includes the copy pasting of fake content, which makes La Verdadera Izquierda an important actor for the dissemination of disinformation (see figure 3, 4 and 5). A report from Elconfidencial.com (April, 2017) about disinformation identifies Alerta Digital, Mediterráneo Digital, and La Verdadera Izquierda as *"three of the websites most accused of spreading hoaxes"*.<sup>6</sup> In this report, the individual

---

<sup>2</sup> 12/3/2020

<sup>3</sup> <https://verdaderaizquierda.blogspot.com/p/acerca-de.html>

<sup>4</sup> The blog <http://ladoble moral.com> or <http://enestadodeguerra.com/>

<sup>5</sup> Zumalacárregui last entry 18 May 2015; @josecharlie2\_93 had just one entry 7 November 2011; El Barandillero last entry 18<sup>th</sup> November 2011; @quiqueval last entry 9 March 2015.

<sup>6</sup> [https://www.elconfidencial.com/comunicacion/2017-04-02/fake-news-noticias-falsas-bulos-posverdad\\_1359176/](https://www.elconfidencial.com/comunicacion/2017-04-02/fake-news-noticias-falsas-bulos-posverdad_1359176/)

behind La Verdadera Izquierda is conscious of the fact that they are spreading disinformation in order to attract viewers and does not care about deleting stories proven to be false.

Among the sources used by La Verdadera Izquierda, we found "junk sites"<sup>7</sup> such as Alerta Digital and Libre Mercado (of Digital Freedom), and "partisan sites" such as OK Diario, as well as media with a clear conservative alignment (La Gaceta, El Confidencial, and El Mundo). Lately, LVI has frequently been using news from OK Diario – a media directed by Eduardo India, which is very polarizing (see figure 3 and 4).



Figure 3 On the left the OK Diario original article, on the right the copy of the article on La Verdadera Izquierda

<sup>7</sup> A classification we established following these criteria <https://comprop.oii.ox.ac.uk/faq/>





Figure 4 On the left the OK Diario original article, on the right the copy of the article on La Verdadera Izquierda

Moreover, by syndicating this content which has been fact-checked by Maldita, La Verdadera Izquierda has also reproduced disinformation content (see figure 5).



Figure 5 A disinformation article produced by OK Diario and copy pasted by La Verdadera Izquierda. Article has been debunked by Spanish fact checker Maldita<sup>8</sup> but only for the OK Diario version

<sup>8</sup> <https://maldita.es/malditobulo/2019/12/17/no-la-alcaldesa-de-barcelona-ada-colau-no-ha-permitido-que-tsunami-democratico-anuncie-en-las-marquesinas-municipales-su-acto-previsto-para-el-clasico/>



Figure 6 - La Verdadera Izquierda reproduced here some false allegations against the far-left party Podemos made by Mediterráneo Digital which were debunked by the Spanish fact checker Maldita<sup>9</sup>

The topics the blog covers are diverse: when the blog began in 2011, they posted very short posts and calls for marches or rallies, for instance, against ETA. The first specific topic LVI published was about ETA and its disarmament, and then it moved onto the 2011 elections, asking people to vote against the left with slogans such as "*Don't vote left, vote values*". Other topics centre on unemployment in Spain, historical memory, the military, the March 11 2004 attacks in Madrid (defending the conspiracy theory that ETA was behind them instead of Islamists and accusing PSOE<sup>10</sup>), anti-abortion, anti-Catalan independence fighters, and anti-migration and refugees.

The volume of content on the blog experienced a clear boost from 2017.

- From its creation until 2016, the publications did not exceed 160 per year (147 in 2012, 129 in 2013, 133 in 2014, 157 in 2015 or 158 in 2016).
- But since 2017 onwards, they have been over 200 (239 in 2017, 242 in 2018, 224 in 2019).
- Although this has not always been the case, it usually posts once a day from Monday to Friday (nothing during weekends or bank holidays) at 7:00 or 7:30 in the morning. Sometimes the time changes, but usually it's a fixed time.

On the same blog, its Twitter and Facebook accounts are displayed while a word cloud highlights the most commonly used words, which are "Corrupción", "España", and "PSOE" (Corruption, Spain, and Spanish Socialist Workers' Party).

<sup>9</sup> <https://maldita.es/malditobulo/2020/01/15/no-podemos-no-ha-prometido-playas-para-musulmanas-en-espana-2/>

<sup>10</sup> <https://archive.is/TuK7B>

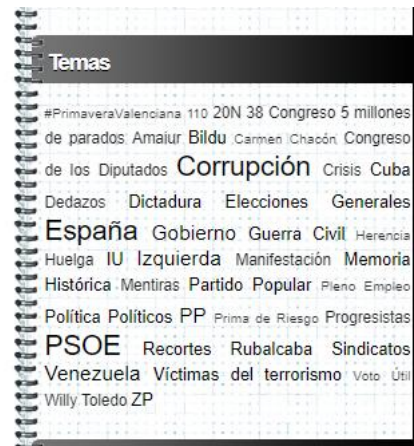


Figure 7 Word cloud displayed by La Verdadera Izquierda blog (consulted 6th March 2020)

## Impact

The blog has 132 followers, many of whom are the other bloggers, but also accounts like Amazon Gadget, which are linked to their activities related to Amazon. We tried to estimate the audience of the website by looking at different indicators<sup>11</sup>:

- By March 3 at 14:26 (CET) LVI registered 9,663,265 visits. By March 12 at 19:49 (CET), it was 9,670,285 visits, so 7000 visit in 9 days.
- According to Similarweb, LVI received in march around 4000 visits.

To get an idea of its popularity, we looked at LVI's most-read articles from 2015, 2016, and 2017. The most widely read article,<sup>12</sup> which links Podemos to help for migrants has more than 300,000 interactions on Facebook, according to the CrowdTangle tool. This may suggest that the blog reached its peak in previous years as the blog posts received more comments. Today, there are hardly any comments in the notes, and articles from 2019 or 2020 are not among the most read.

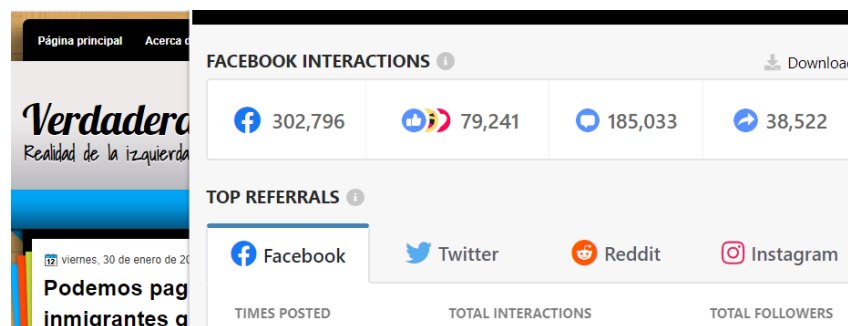


Figure 8 CrowdTangle Numbers for La Verdadera Izquierda article "Podemos pagará 600 euros al mes a todos los inmigrantes que lleguen a territorio español" - "Podemos will pay 600 euros a month to all the immigrants who arrive in Spanish territory"

<sup>11</sup> One should keep in mind these numbers are only estimations.

<sup>12</sup><https://verdaderaizquierda.blogspot.com/2015/01/podemos-pagara-600-euros-al-mes-todos.html>



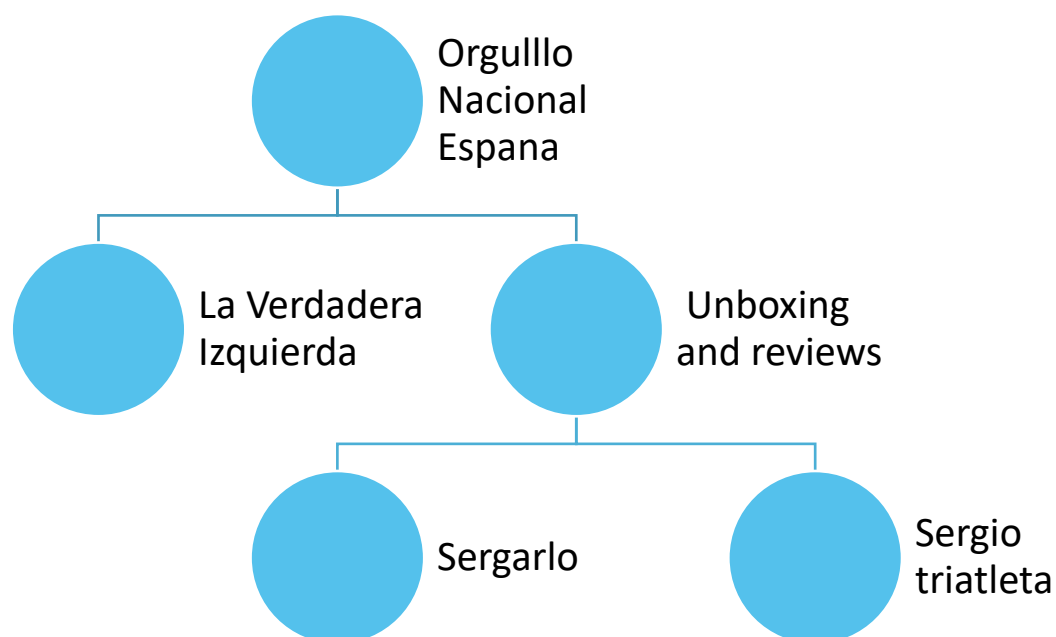
## The Network

We uncovered a network behind LVI by linking together a series of Facebook pages and Twitter accounts that are operated by the same person.

### Facebook pages connected

La Verdadera Izquierda Facebook page was created on October 11 2017 complete with the same profile picture used for its Twitter page. It is managed by four accounts from Spain, according to the information provided on Facebook's page transparency section. Currently, it has not paid for any political advertisements on Facebook. It has 4,286 followers and 4,139 likes. Its cover image refers to the fact that patriots are the only people who command respect: *"He who tarnishes the name of his country and pays tribute to the enemy love, is not a son of Spain, he is a son of ..."*. The posts are more varied because the community is allowed to post on the page, but all posts are in line with their political ideology.

From this page we followed the "Pages liked by this page," which concerns pages that LVI has liked. From going onto Orgullo Nacional Espana, we found that this page had liked LVI and Unboxings & Reviews pages. Then, on Unboxings and Reviews, we saw that this page had liked Sergarlo.



Eventually, we could determine all the pages are likely linked. This does not prove that they are operated by the same person, but it strongly hints towards this direction, especially when the pages, such as Unboxings & Reviews, have very few likes.

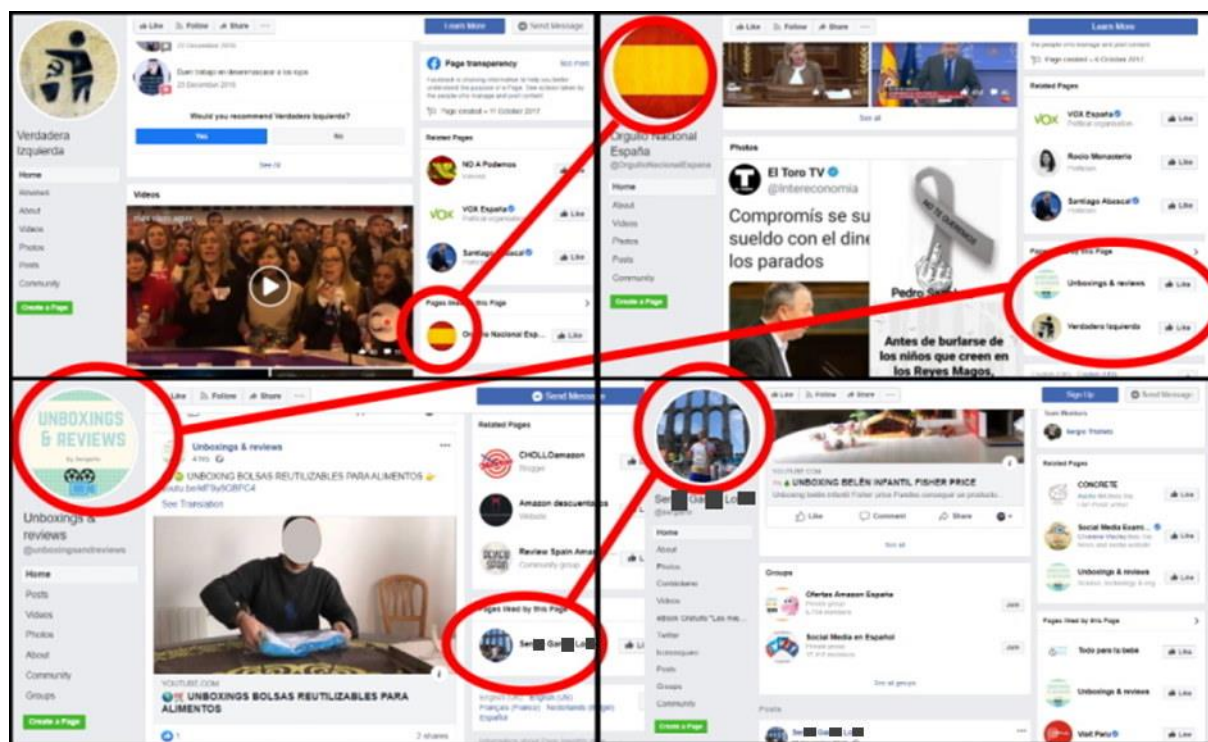


Figure 9 Network of pages followed through the "page liked by this page" frame

## OSINT TECHNIQUE

To reinforce the proof of the connection between Facebook pages or to have an idea of who is operating them, one can find clues in the "Community" section of a Facebook page. First, it displays the "Top Fans" section together with a time clue. If a profile is the "Top Fan" of a page since its creation, it could be that this person is the owner of the page. Second, the "Community" section also displays who has posted on the page. This also gives good hints of interconnections between accounts and pages, especially when posts from the same profile or page appear regularly. This is how we were able to see that "Orgullo Nacional Espana" had regularly posted articles from La Verdadera Izquierda on La Verdadera Izquierda's Facebook page.



Orgullo Nacional Espana was created the 6<sup>th</sup> October 2017 and now<sup>13</sup> has 42,943 likes on the page and 47,459 followers. It shares the same kind of content as LVI, as well as every article posted by the La Verdadera Izquierda blog and links to Amazon marketplace to buy specific products .

The Orgullo Nacional Espana page has liked two Facebook pages. The first one is La Verdadera Izquierda, which is logical, and the second one is "Unboxing & Reviews," which was strange because the Orgullo Nacional Espana page has 42,000 followers and the "Unboxing & Reviews" page only has 351 likes and 397 followers.

Unboxing & Reviews was created 25<sup>th</sup> March 2019 and it almost exclusively shares videos from a YouTube channel called "Sergarlo90". Unboxing & Reviews likes a Facebook page called "Ser\*\*\* Gar\*\*\* Lo\*\*" (displaying the full name), and we also found it was connected to a Facebook profile called "Sergio Triatleta".

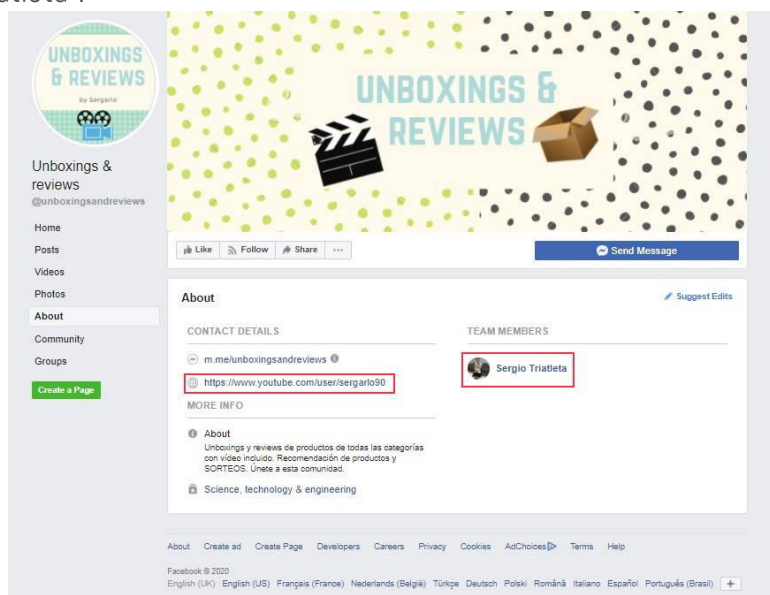
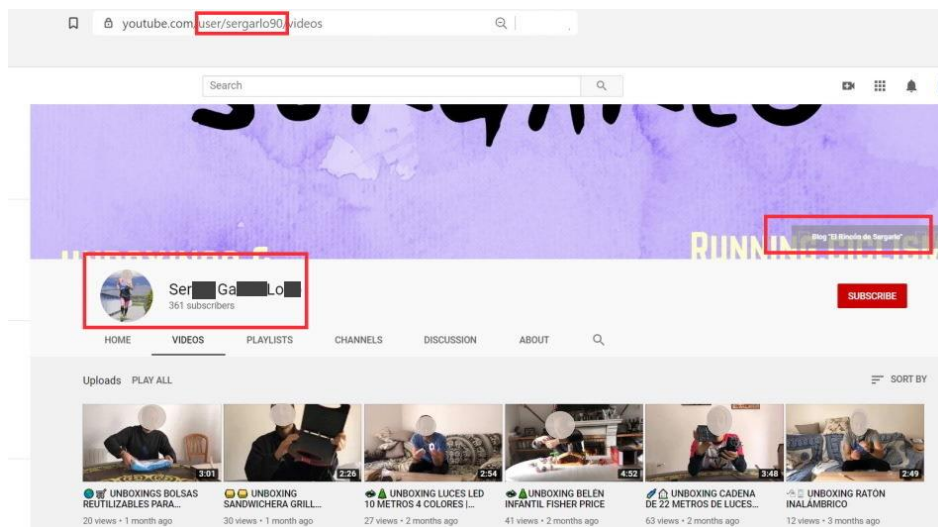


Figure 10 Screenshot of the "about" section of the Facebook page Unboxing and Review displaying Sergio Triatleta profile and "Sergarlo90" YouTube Channel

On the YouTube channel proposed by Unboxing & Reviews,<sup>14</sup> one could find several clues:

<sup>13</sup>Consulted the 6<sup>th</sup> March 2020

<sup>14</sup><https://www.youtube.com/user/sergarlo90/videos>



*Figure 11 Sergarlo90 YouTube Channel displayed on Unboxing and Review Facebook Page with videos of Sergarlo unboxing stuff. Monetised Amazon Links can be found under the videos. The Channel also points toward the blog El Rincon de Sergarlo*

- 1) Unboxing & Reviews' website address on Facebook is "Sergarlo90" YouTube Channel and Sergio Triatleta's Facebook profile has a profile picture of someone using "Sergarlo" as a name on a triathlon competition bib. The person depicted in the photo is the same person that appears in the videos from the Unboxing and Review YouTube channel.
- 2) The Channel is called "Ser\*\*\* Gar\*\*\* Lo\*\*", which is the same name of the public Facebook page.
- 3) On the right-hand of the YouTube channel, there is a link for the blog "El Rincon de Sergarlo",<sup>15</sup> which specialises in digital marketing and social network presence and monetisation. El Rincon de Sergarlo is associated with the @Sergarlo Twitter account due to the widget that displays the account's tweets (see figure 11).

<sup>15</sup><http://www.sergarlo.com/>

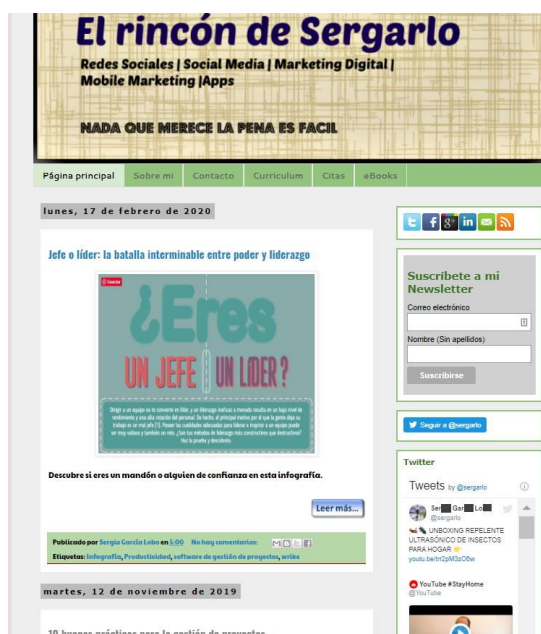


Figure 12 Screenshot of El Rincon de Sergio blog



## The Twitter network and Amazon

From these results, we wanted to examine the Twitter accounts related to LVI and Sergarlo. They appeared to be linked together due to their interactions and the similarity of their posts. We also investigated the possible use of automation.

### The Twitter accounts

Associated with the Facebook pages and seemingly behaving like them, we uncovered a series of Twitter accounts:

- Constantly interacting with each other;
- Posting the same post every time a new article is published by La Verdadera Izquierda.



Figure 13 similarity of behaviour between la Verdadera Izquierda and Orgullo Nacional Espana Facebook page and on @YoEstoyConVOX Twitter account retweeted by Patria\_Espana

We investigated the timestamps of the posts to see if these similarities were the result of an automated process. It does not seem to be the case.

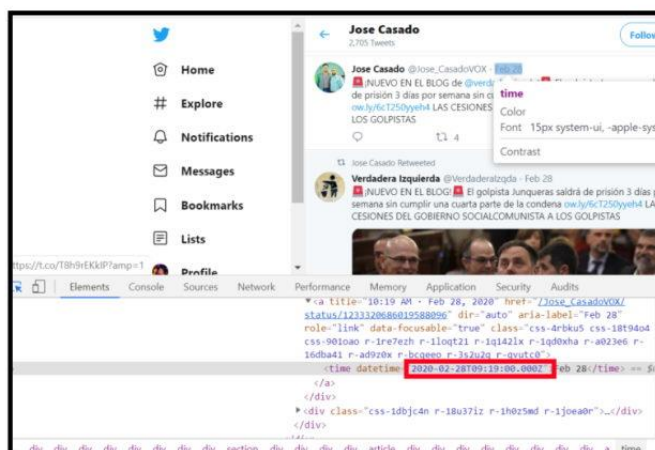
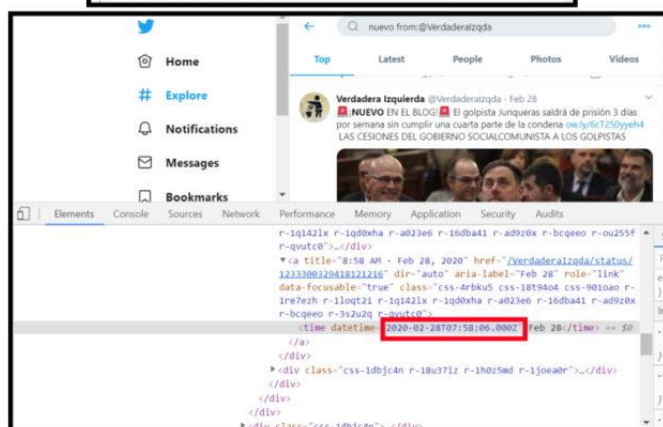


Figure 14 One blogpost from La Verdadera Izquierda disseminated through two accounts and two Facebook pages. Timestamp investigation tend to indicate it was copy pasted. The Z indicates Zulu Time. 07:58:06 is actually 08:58:06 and 09:19:00 is 10:19:00 Spanish time

With Twitter analysis tools, one can observe regular interactions between all the accounts suspected to be tied to Sergarlo.

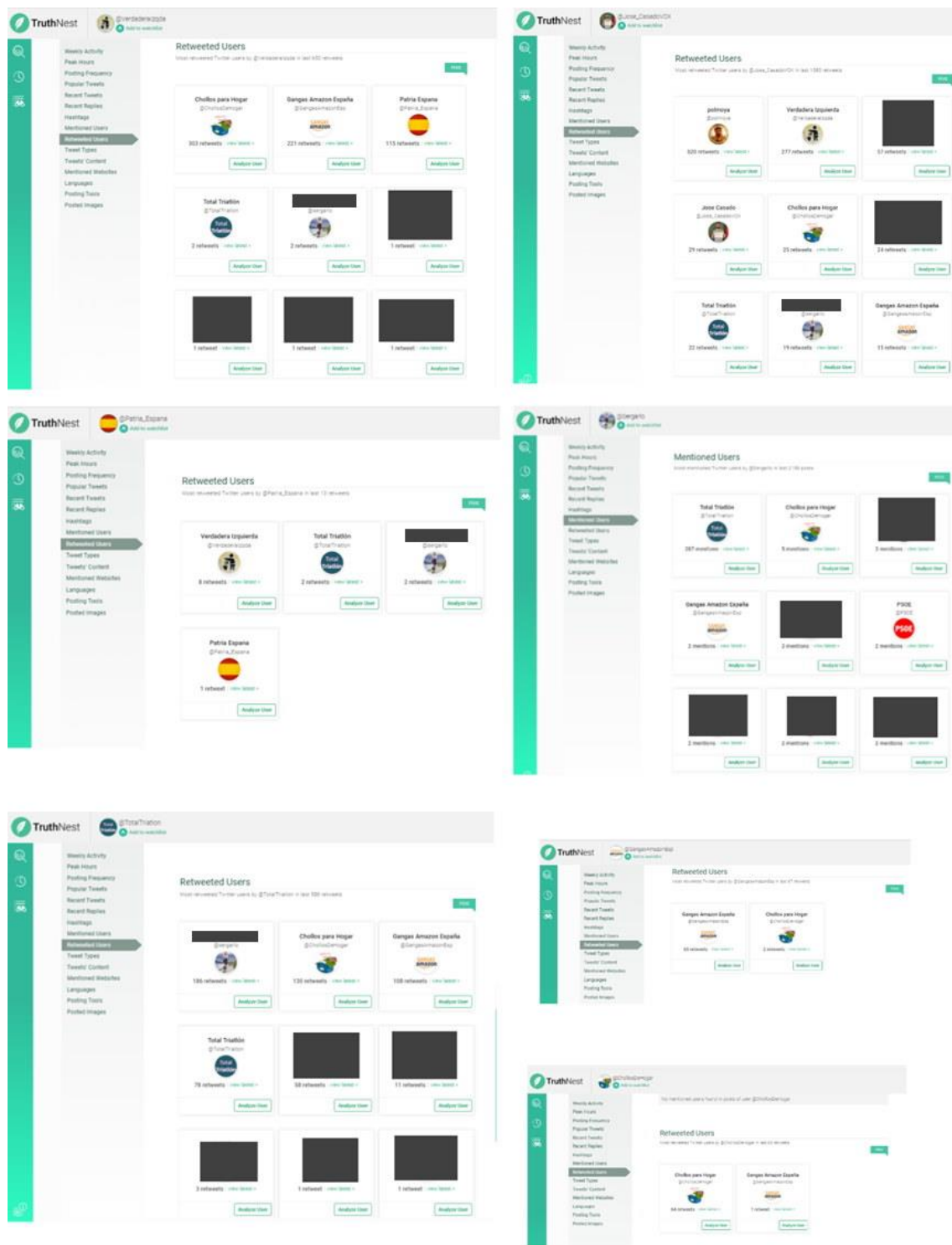


Figure 15 TruthNest analysis of the 6 suspicious account most retweeted users

La Verdadera Izquierda's Twitter account was created in June 2011 and published its first tweet around this time. Its first tweets refer to alleged fraud in film subsidies with the socialist government and Spain's participation in the war in Afghanistan. From the third tweet onwards, the account asks for recommendations on how to gain followers. LVI's Twitter account receives its first like and retweet on June 25th and begins to gain followers, reaching a thousand before the opening of the blog.



Figure 16 Instance of La Verdadera Izquierda offensive tweets

At the time of the investigation, its followers reached 38,300. The tweets included the daily posts from the blog, but since the 25<sup>th</sup> November 2016, it has shared Amazon links. Since then, in addition to posting new LVI blog posts, @Verdaderalqda Twitter account has constantly retweeted two other accounts promoting far right content: @YoEstoyConVOX<sup>16</sup> and @Patria\_espana,<sup>17</sup> as well as two other accounts dedicated to sharing monetised Amazon Links: @GangasAmazonEsp and @ChollosDeHogar.

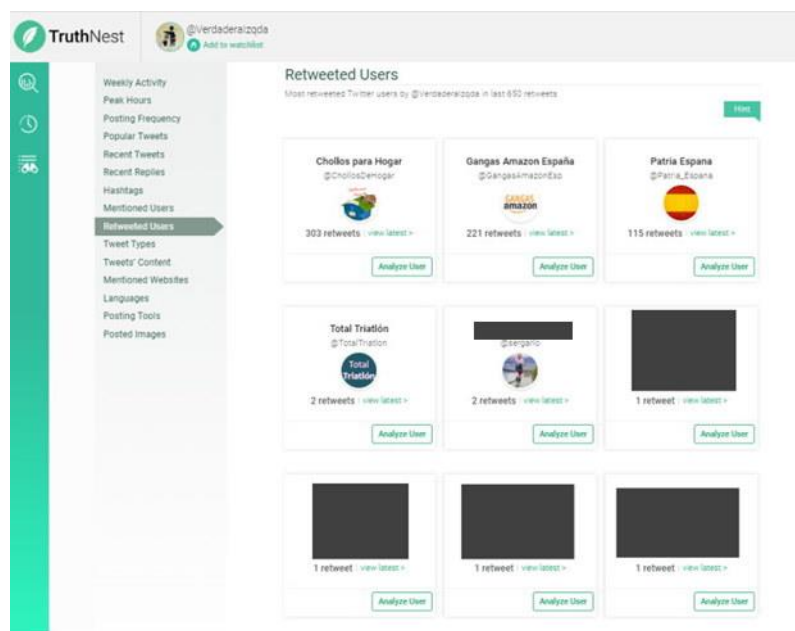


Figure 17 La Verdadera Izquierda's Twitter account analysed via Truth Nest displaying most retweeted users

<sup>16</sup> (and its new name @Jose\_casadoVOX)

<sup>17</sup> As we will see below, @YoEstoyConVox and @Patria\_Espana changed name and behaviour during the investigation

## @Patria\_Espana

@Patria\_Espana is also an account dedicated to patriotic and far right content, which frequently shares La Verdadera Izquierda's posts.



Figure 18 Insulting tweet from @Patria\_Espana

During the investigation, this account changed names and reappeared starting from scratch with no followers and no tweets.<sup>18</sup> It now has 270 followers and displays a link to La Verdadera Izquierda blogspot in its bio. The new account displays its most retweeted users, which are La Verdadera Izquierda, @Patria\_Espana (itself), Total Triatlón, and Sergarlo's account – two of which are operated directly by Sergarlo himself.

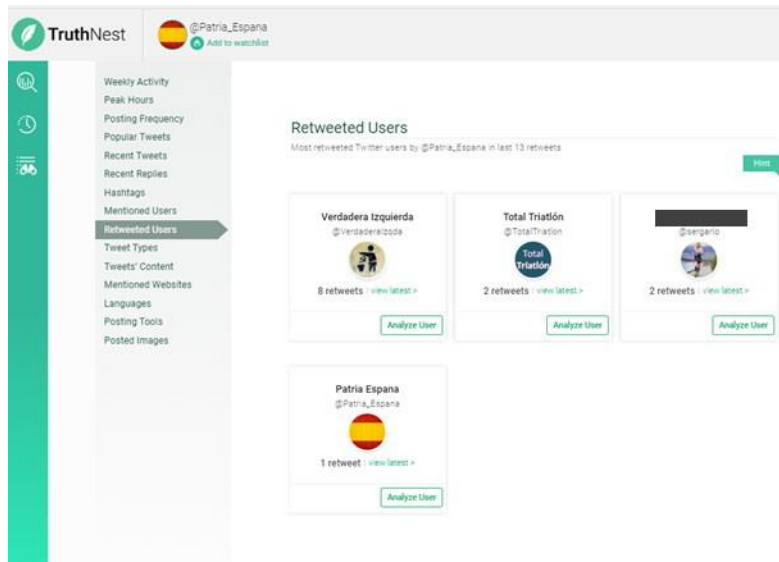


Figure 19 TruthNest Analysis of @Patria\_Espana new account showing in the most retweeted users the accounts we tied to Sergarlo

## @YoEstoyConVox (renamed @Jose\_CasadoVOX)

<sup>18</sup>During our investigation, @Patria\_Espana had changed its name to become Nova Espera Renovables @Novaesfera\_, and a new account named @Patria\_Espana was created. We investigate this in detail below, page 29



Like @Patria\_Espana, the @YoEstoyConVox account renamed Jose\_CasadoVOX was formerly dedicated to promoting Vox, sharing La Verdadera Izquierda blogposts, and other accounts operated by Sergarlo. As we saw with two other accounts Patria\_Espana and Polmoya,<sup>19</sup> YoEstoyConVox suddenly changed its name and behaviour. We strongly suspect, after seeing this behaviour for three different accounts previously tied to Sergarlo, that Sergarlo gives the ownership of some of these accounts to others after populating them with far right and misinformative content.

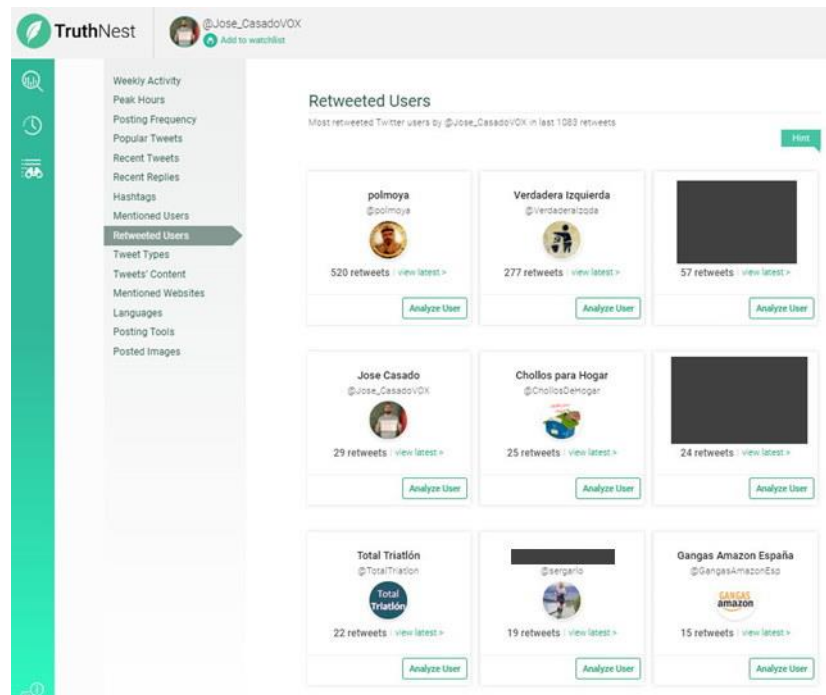


Figure 20 The most frequent retweets displayed on TruthNest show other accounts interacting with each other

<sup>19</sup>See below

## Why is Polmoya is on this list?

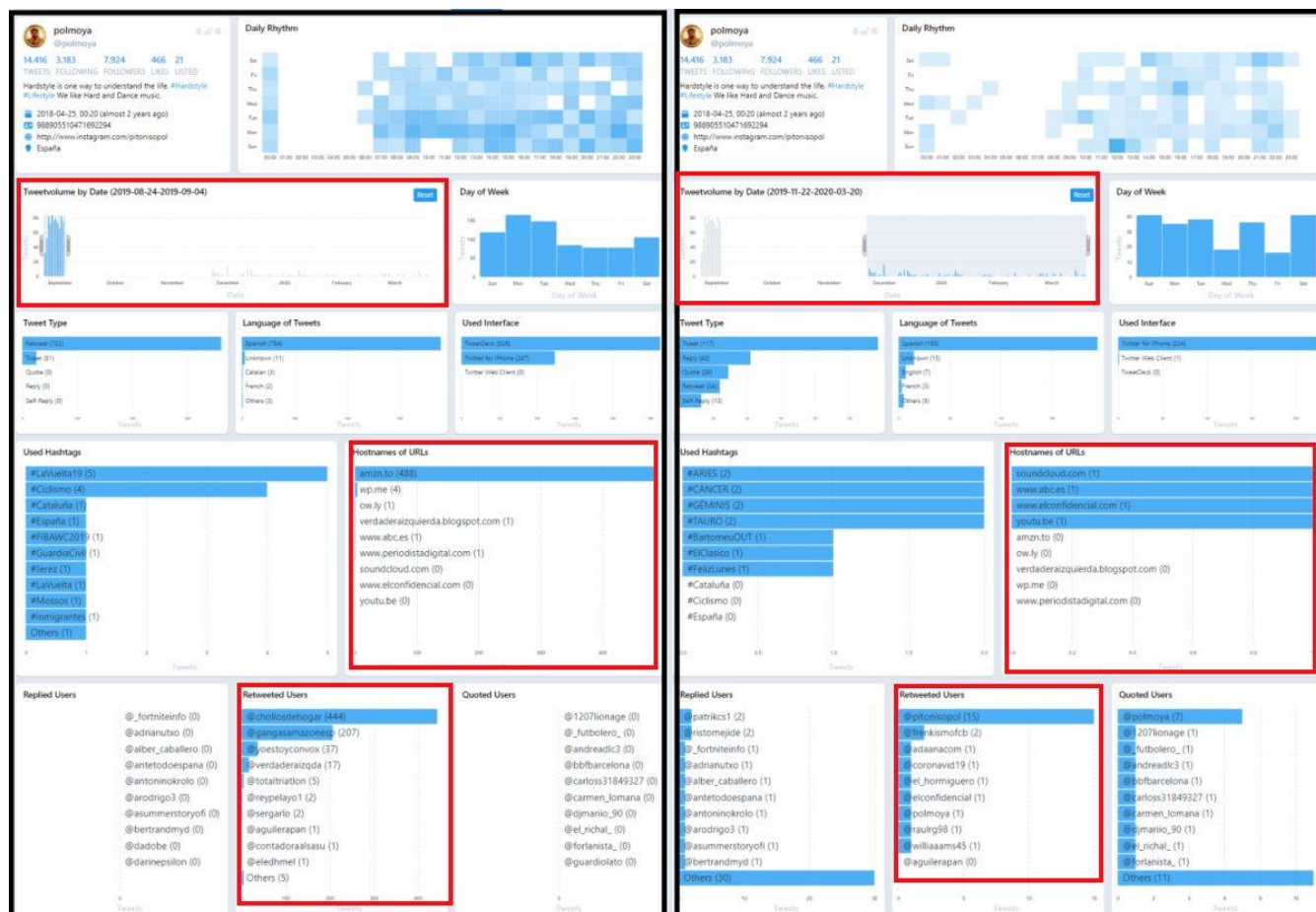


Figure 21 It seems that the account Polmoya was behaving like other accounts operated by Sergarlo until September 2019 before stopping and a totally new behaviour on November 2019

The Polmoya account appears on the list because this account was previously behaving like other accounts operated by Sergarlo through retweeting monetised Amazon links and sharing nationalistic and anti-Islam Islam.



Figure 22 Polmoya account displaying tweets against Islam

However, since the end of November 2019, this account has behaved totally differently, and its activity is no longer related to other Sergarlo accounts. It is possible that, like @Patria\_Espana and @YoEstoyConVox, Sergarlo transferred this populated account to someone else.

## @Sergarlo

The Twitter account @Sergarlo has 23,500 followers. In bio he states he is an Amazon affiliate with the code "sergarlo" and that he's the founder of the @TotalTriatlon Twitter account (associated with the totaltriatlon.com website).



Figure 23 Screenshot of @Sergarlo Twitter account with a link toward his Amazon Associates account, his website El Rincon de Sergarlo and @totaltriatlon Twitter account

In the list of his most retweeted users, one can find @Polmoya, because this account was behaving like others operated by Sergarlo. One can also find @Verdaderaizqda and @Patria\_Espana, which are both tied to La Verdadera Izquierda blog. In addition, one can find three other accounts: @TotalTriatlon (also operated by Sergarlo), @ChollosDeHogar and @GangasAmazonEsp, which are dedicated to tweeting Amazon links.

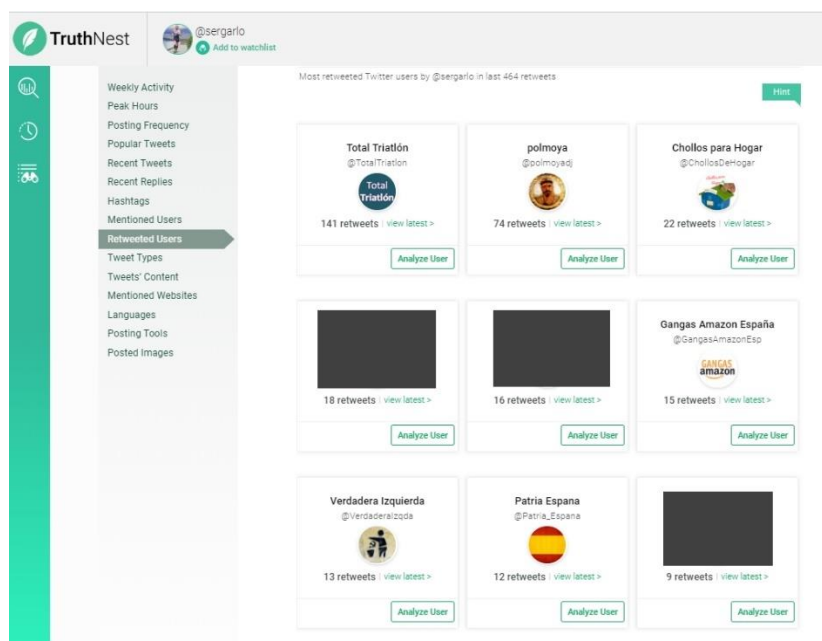


Figure 24 TruthNest analysis of @Sergarlo Twitter account displaying in the "most retweeted users" section other accounts we suspected were connected to Sergarlo

We started to examine the Amazon links spread by these last three accounts: @TotalTriatlon, @ChollosDeHogar, and @GangasAmazonEsp, and we discovered they had been sharing hundreds of Amazon monetised links, all pointing toward the same tracking IDs. These Amazon links were also shared by all the aforementioned accounts we tied to Sergarlo.<sup>20</sup>

## OSINT TECHNIQUE

The Amazon Associates program requires its participants to specify that the users are redirected to Amazon links, and to do so, Amazon has its own URL shortener. Thus, a participant in the program will likely use "amzn.to" for sharing their monetised links on social networks. To get the results above, we conducted a Twitter exact search to see how many times a tweet has been posted by the linked accounts with "amzn.to" as a keyword:

E.g. [https://Twitter.com/search?q=amzn.to%20from%3A%40Verdaderalzgda&src=typed\\_query&f=live](https://Twitter.com/search?q=amzn.to%20from%3A%40Verdaderalzgda&src=typed_query&f=live)

It works with other search operators and can be used via Google to find monetised Amazon links shared by a Facebook page:

E.g. "site:facebook.com/OrgulloNacionalEspana amzn.to"

Although it is not possible to determine exactly how many Amazon links were shared because this technique does not count the links to the YouTube channels nor the retweets, it does give an indication that can be useful to assess the extent of the monetisation.

<sup>20</sup>As one will see below, Amazon Tracking IDs are a code that Amazon puts in its URL addresses to reward the members of the Amazon Associates program. All the accounts were sharing links to Amazon URLs using the same six IDs: Sergarlo, codesergarlo, \*\*globo, voxfb, txuso, and totatria

### Massively sharing monetised Amazon links

We noticed that all of the accounts we tied to Sergarlo had been sharing a massive amount of Amazon links. Therefore, we decided to investigate the possibility of monetisation. We eventually discovered all the links displayed were pointing to the same tracking IDs, meaning the monetisation was benefiting the very same person(s) behind the tracking IDs.

### @ChollosDeHogar and @GangasAmazonEsp

Since November 2017, the account Gangas Amazon Espana<sup>21</sup> has dedicated itself to sharing Amazon links – a move that was followed by the account Chollos De Hogar<sup>22</sup> from February 2018 onwards. All the links we clicked on pointed to one of the tracker IDs used by Sergarlo.



Figure 25 TruthNest analysis of the account Chollos para Hogar indicates 100% bot indicator. It has tweeted 38,000 tweets, all with Amazon links

<sup>21</sup> <https://Twitter.com/GangasAmazonEsp>

<sup>22</sup> <https://Twitter.com/ChollosDeHogar>



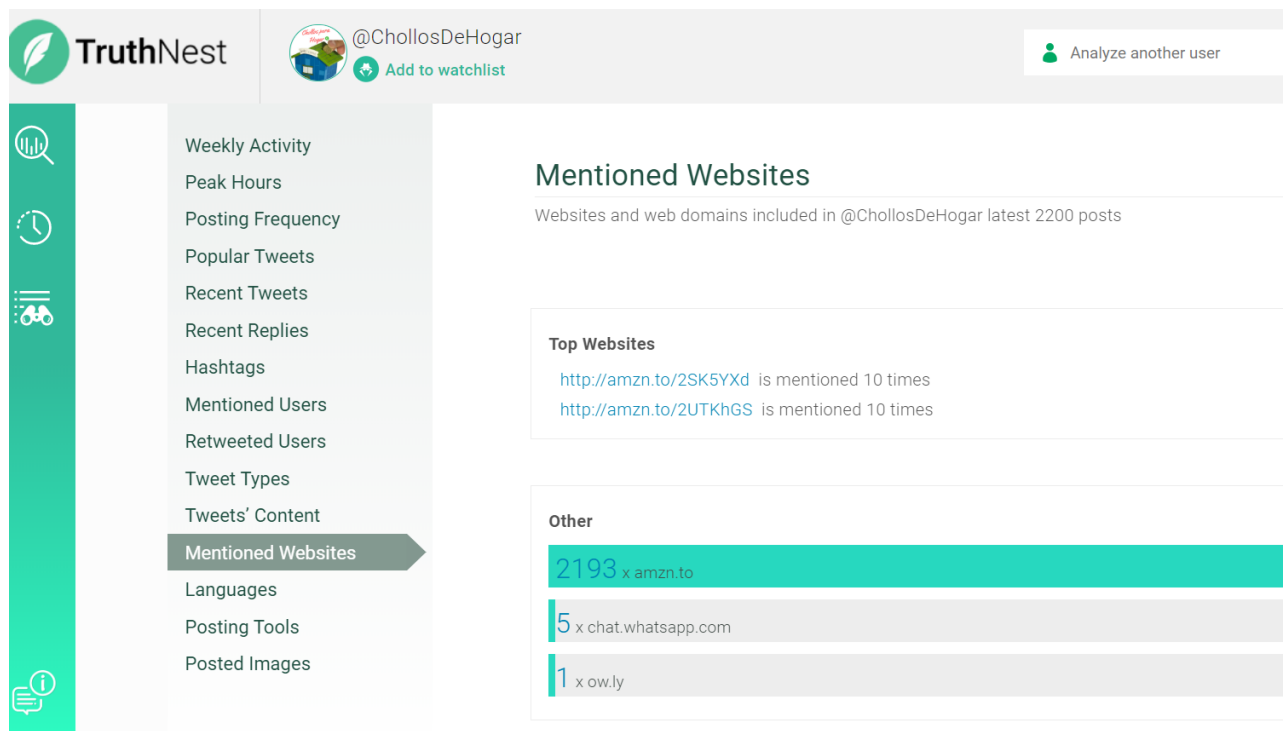


Figure 26 On TruthNest, in the Top Websites section, the two URL points to Amazon monetised links with the Tracking ID "codesergarlo"

@GangasAmazonEsp used "totatria" as an ID to share the links. Since the beginning, it has tweeted 48,000 times – all of which are only Amazon links. The profile picture associated with the account uses a modified Amazon logo and the link displayed in the bio points towards a URL associated with "Sergarlo" ID.

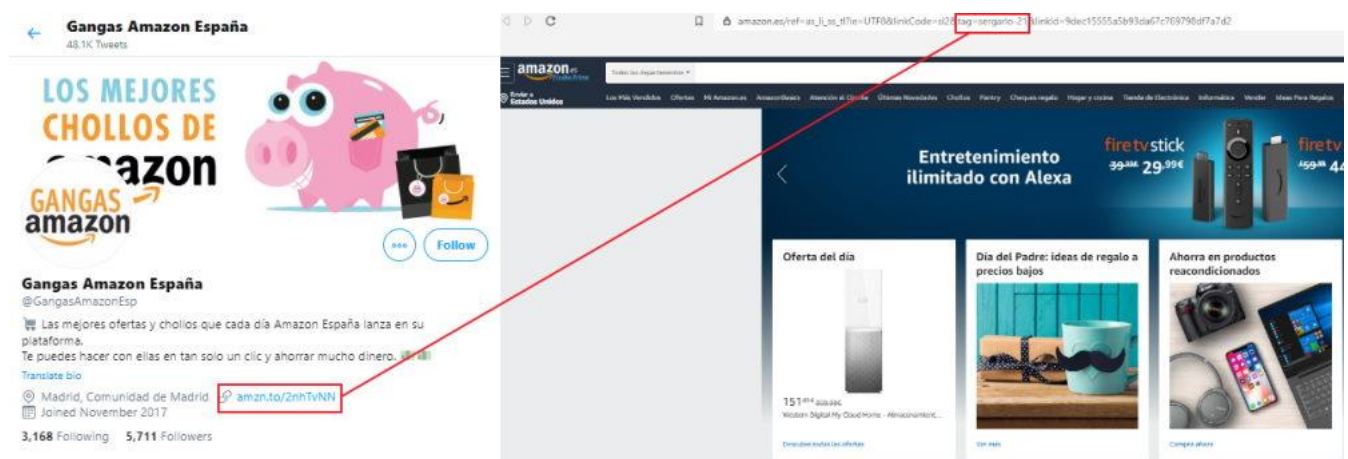


Figure 27 Gangas Amazon Espana Twitter account<sup>23</sup> with a URL pointing to "Sergarlo" ID

<sup>23</sup> <https://perma.cc/S7QB-TRK8>

## @TotalTriatlon

This account was created by Sergarlo in August 2015 as an account to give tips and training plans for triathlon competitors. It is associated to the eponymous website created by Sergarlo<sup>24</sup> in September 2015, and its Facebook page dated from September 2017 counts 3,900 likes.



Figure 28 Total Triatlon Twitter account associated with totaltriatlon.com created by @Sergarlo, which retweets @ChollosDeHogar

The TotalTriatlon also massively shares monetised Amazon links.<sup>25</sup> The first tweet with an Amazon link dates from 4 July 2017 with "totatria" ID. As we will see below, it seems the monetisation through Amazon links started with this account and its dedicated website.

## Amazon links on @Sergarlo

For the @Sergarlo account, there are approximately 50 direct Amazon links going back to September 2017.<sup>26</sup>

<sup>24</sup><https://perma.cc/5UD6-4WZL>

<sup>25</sup><https://perma.cc/8WK3-HH6R>

<sup>26</sup>We speak here of direct tweets with Amazon links obtained through this search.

[https://Twitter.com/search?q=amzn.to%20from%3A%40sergarlo&src=typed\\_query&f=live](https://Twitter.com/search?q=amzn.to%20from%3A%40sergarlo&src=typed_query&f=live)

The @Sergarlo Twitter account is monetising much more through retweeting his other accounts and links to his YouTube channel.

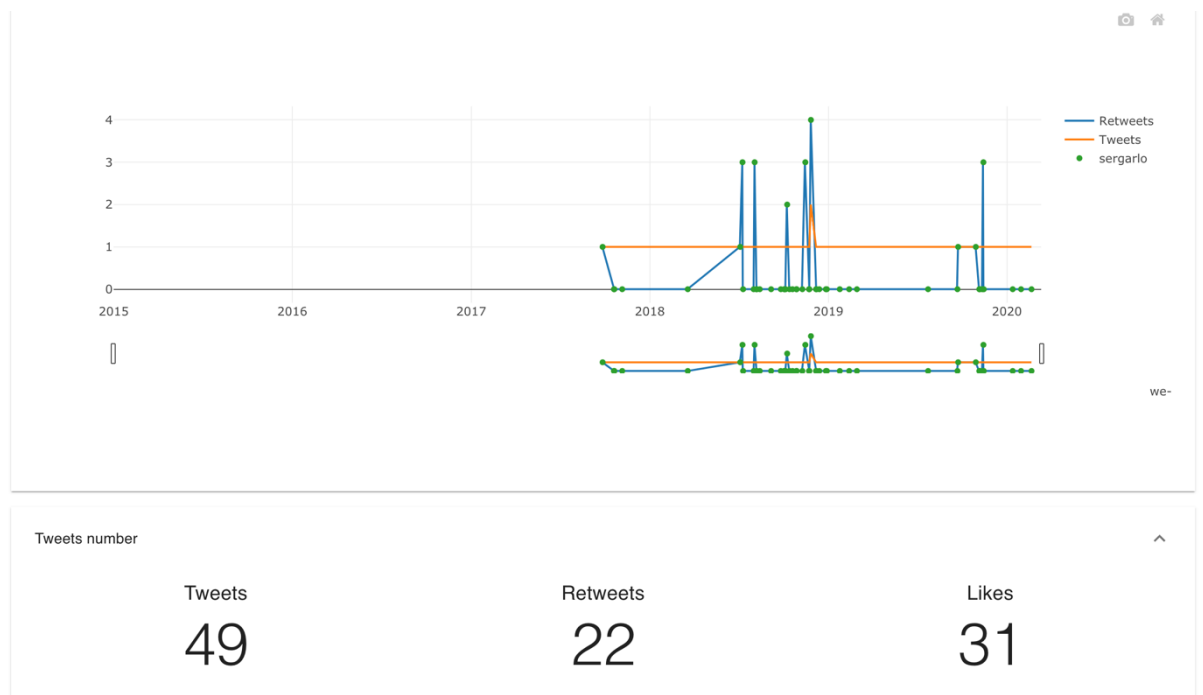


Figure 29 Screenshot of WeVerify SNA tool used to search "amzn.to" on the @Sergarlo Twitter account

He promotes the @TotaTriatlón Twitter account, the Sergarlo YouTube channel (both monetising Amazon links), sometimes retweets @Patria\_Espana, and sells knives on Amazon paying homage to the Guardia Civil.

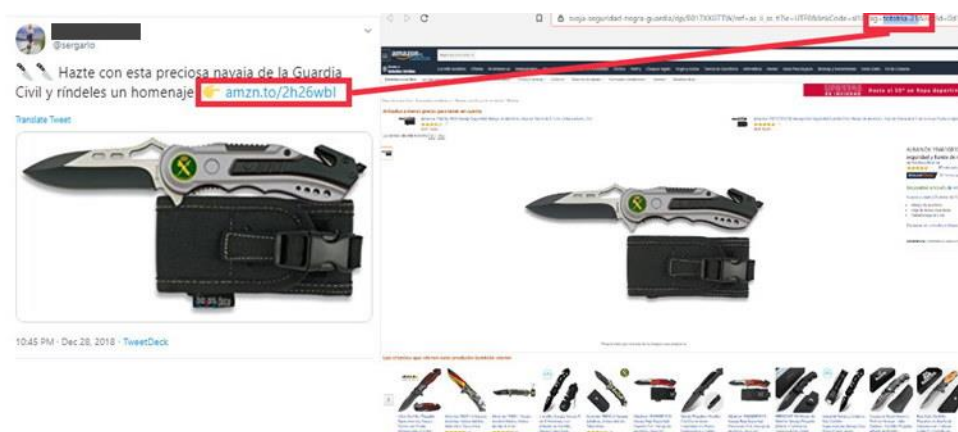


Figure 30 Sergarlo promoting the sale of a knife decorated with Guardia Civil symbol on Amazon, linking back to the "totatria" ID

### Amazon links on @Patria\_Espana

This account manages to mix the promotion of Amazon links with nationalistic and far right messages. It also spreads Amazon links with no connection to any message other than promotional.



Figure 31 @Patria\_Espana Twitter account first tweets with an Amazon link

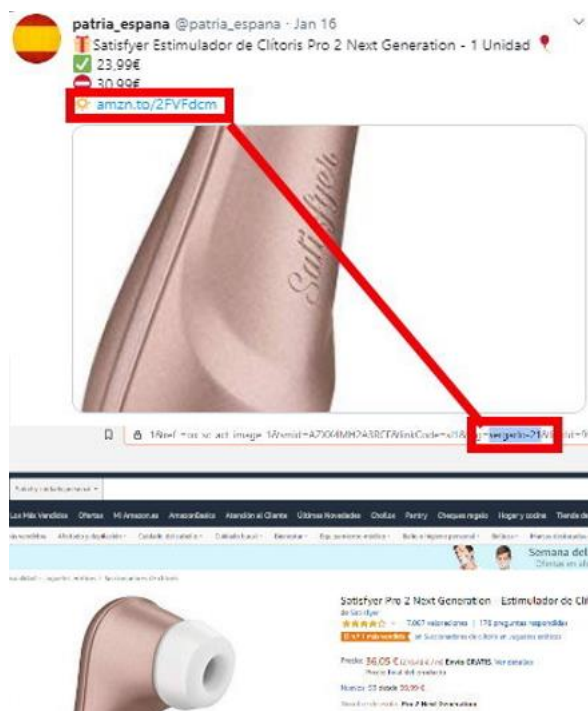


Figure 32 Here the Patria\_Espana Twitter account also selling a clitoris stimulator on Amazon for the benefit of "Sergarlo"

@Patria\_Espana is also innovative when it comes to mixing patriotic causes and selling products via monetised Amazon links. For instance, the account promotes Voltaren to Catalan demonstrators beaten by the police.

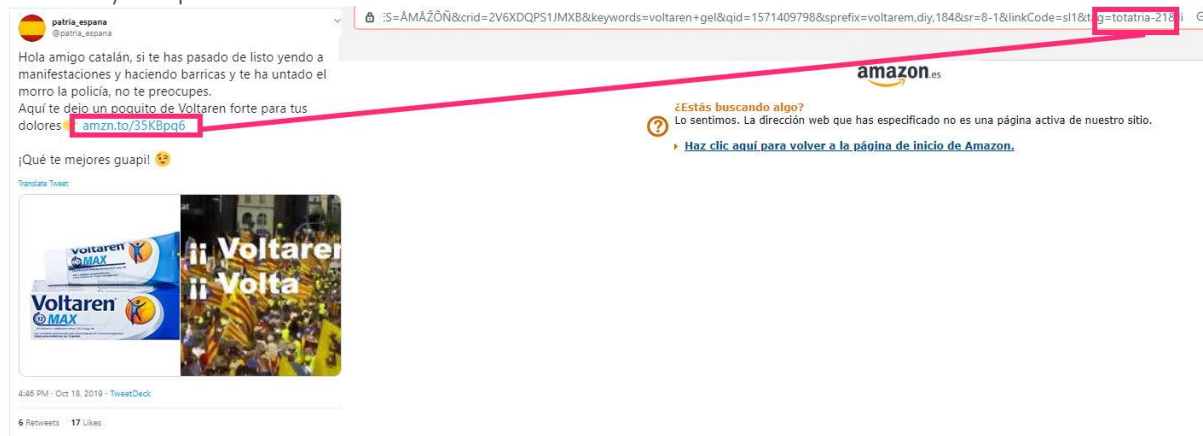


Figure 33 @Patria\_Espana jokingly selling Voltaren to catalunia demonstrators beaten by police and linking to a monetised Amazon link paying "totatria"

During our investigation, @Patria\_Espana had changed its name to Nova Espera Renovables @Novaesfera\_. We discovered the account changes with the following indicators:

- The @Patria\_Espana Twitter user ID is the same as the User ID of @Novaesfera\_<sup>27</sup>
- On Twitter, there were still traces of replies to @Patria\_Espana hinting towards the change:

<sup>27</sup>We compared the user ID of the @Patria\_Espana account found in the source code for the @Novaesfera\_ ID on <https://tweeterid.com/>, and we found it matched. Sadly the links we used for the source code are no longer available





Figure 34 La Verdadera Izquierda account replying to @Patria\_Espana account. Twitter shows in the "relevant people" column "Nova Esfera Renovables," which is associated with the "@Patria\_Espana" ID

- One can see (most probably because Sergarlo has automated his Amazon links tweets) that @Novaesfera\_ still tweets Amazon links pointing to the Sergarlo ID on Amazon. The very same URL is also shared by two of other accounts operated by Sergarlo.

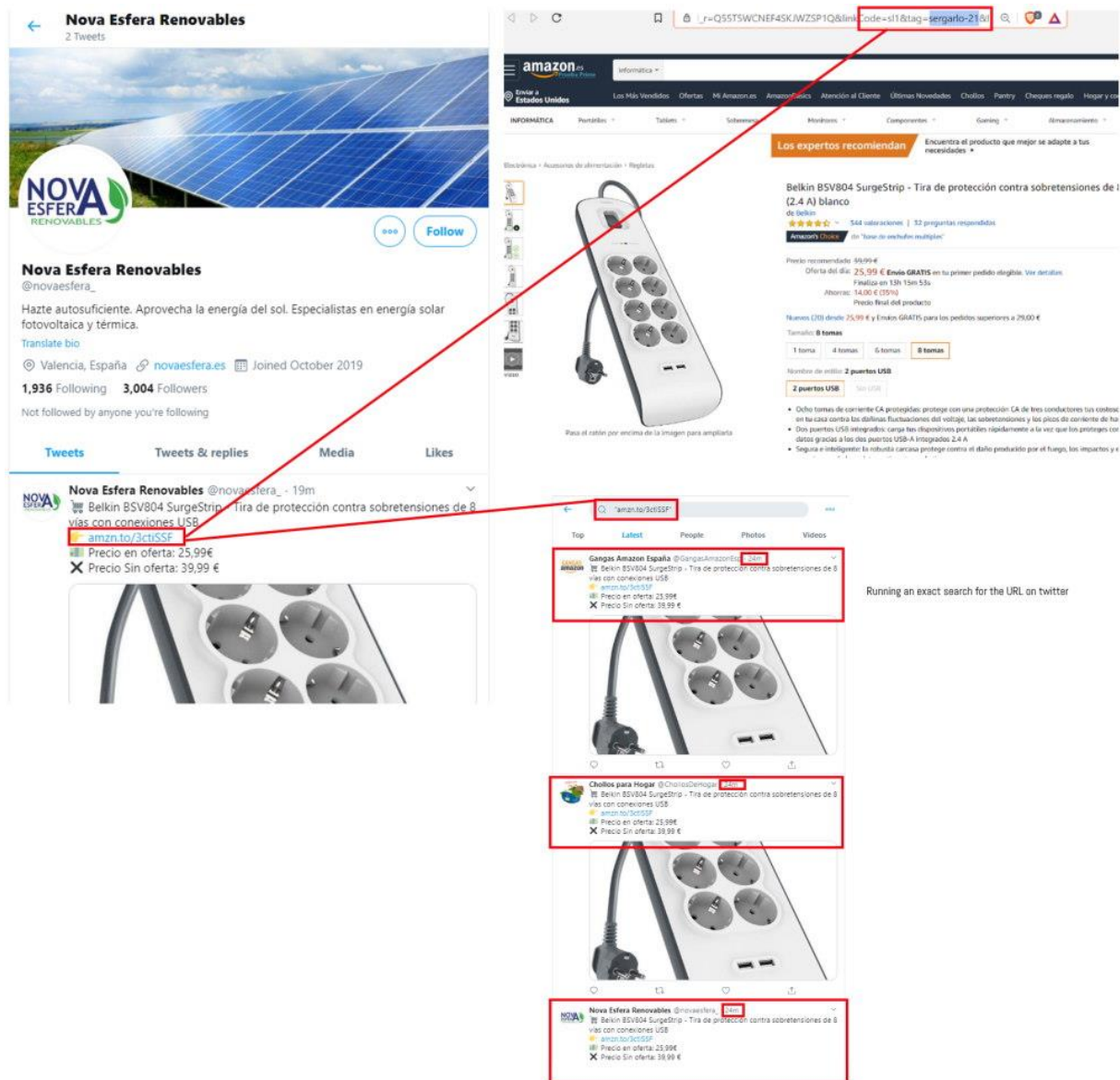


Figure 35 Nova Esfera Renovables' first tweet promoting an Amazon URL pointing to the "Sergarlo" tracking ID. The same URL is then shared by Gangas Amazon Espana and Chollos Para Hogar at the exact same time (see figure below)

The figure consists of three screenshots of Twitter posts, each showing the same tweet content and source code. The first screenshot is from the account 'Gangas Amazon España' (@GangasAmazonEsp), the second from 'Chollos De Hogar' (@ChollosDeHogar), and the third from 'Nova Esfera Renovables' (@novaesfera\_). Each screenshot highlights the timestamp in the source code, which is '2020-03-05T09:30:00.000Z'.

The first screenshot shows the tweet from 'Gangas Amazon España' with the timestamp '2020-03-05T09:30:00.000Z' highlighted in the source code.

The second screenshot shows the tweet from 'Chollos De Hogar' with the timestamp '2020-03-05T09:30:00.000Z' highlighted in the source code.

The third screenshot shows the tweet from 'Nova Esfera Renovables' with the timestamp '2020-03-05T09:30:00.000Z' highlighted in the source code.

The link published on @GangasAmazonEsp March 5, 2020 9:30:00

The link published on @ChollosDeHogar March 5, 2020 9:30:00

The link, retrieved from an archived google cache version of @novaesfera\_, indicates a Data Time Ms 1583406000000 once converted it gives March 5, 2020 9:30:00

Figure 36 The different timestamps of the same link posted on the Gangas Amazon Espana, Chollos De Hogar, and Nova Esfera Renovables accounts, shows that the link was posted at the exact same time.<sup>28</sup> The time is indicated in Zulu time, 9:30:00 is 10:30:00 CET.

## OSINT TECHNIQUE

To get the exact time of a tweet, one can go on the main timeline of a Twitter account. Then, by inspecting the date element through the web console, one can see the exact time a tweet was posted (GMT 0 – Zulu time). It is important to mention that this only works with the main timeline; it does not work with the direct link of the tweet where this feature is unfortunately not displayed.

Finding out the time of the @Novaesfera\_ tweet was more complicated because the tweet was quickly deleted. We went on Google to find a Google cache version of the @Novaesfera\_ timeline, and from inspecting the time element of that Google cache version, we were able to retrieve a timestamp in milliseconds. We then converted the timestamp using <https://www.epochconverter.com/>.

Sergarlo then created a new @Patria\_Espana account in March 2020 with the exact same cover and profile picture, complete with a link to a La Verdadera Izquierda blogpost. The new @Patria\_Espana account claims that the previous one was closed by Twitter and it takes a proud stance against Twitter's "censorship" and the defence of Spain.



Figure 37 Screenshots of tweets from the new @Patria\_Espana Twitter account, claiming that the reason they disappeared and started anew was because of Twitter's censorship.

## The Amazon links of @YoEstoyConVox / @Jose\_CasadoVOX

YoEstoyConVox has been monetising nationalist and far right content with Amazon links connected to Sergarlo's tracking IDs. For @YoEstoyConVox, approximately 80 Amazon links have been shared since its creation in March 2018.<sup>29</sup> All the links we clicked on pointed to the same tracking IDs used

<sup>28</sup>We saved the google cache version in web archive. It is accessible by copy pasting the following link in the Wayback machine: [https://webcache.googleusercontent.com/search?q=cache:k74SCPcxma8J:https://Twitter.com/novaesfera\\_+&cd=1&hl=fr&ct=cInk&gl=us](https://webcache.googleusercontent.com/search?q=cache:k74SCPcxma8J:https://Twitter.com/novaesfera_+&cd=1&hl=fr&ct=cInk&gl=us)

<sup>29</sup>[https://Twitter.com/search?q=amzn.to%20from%3A%40yoestoyconvox&src=recent\\_search\\_click&f=live](https://Twitter.com/search?q=amzn.to%20from%3A%40yoestoyconvox&src=recent_search_click&f=live)

by the other accounts. Therefore, using Sergarlo's tracking IDs, we found that @YoEstoyConVox had been selling socks with the national flag, a ball scratcher for "podemites", nationalistic mugs, and even Christmas cribs in the name of nationalistic Christian pride.



Figure 38 @YoEstoyConVox bringing national pride to sportswear (and money to "totatria")

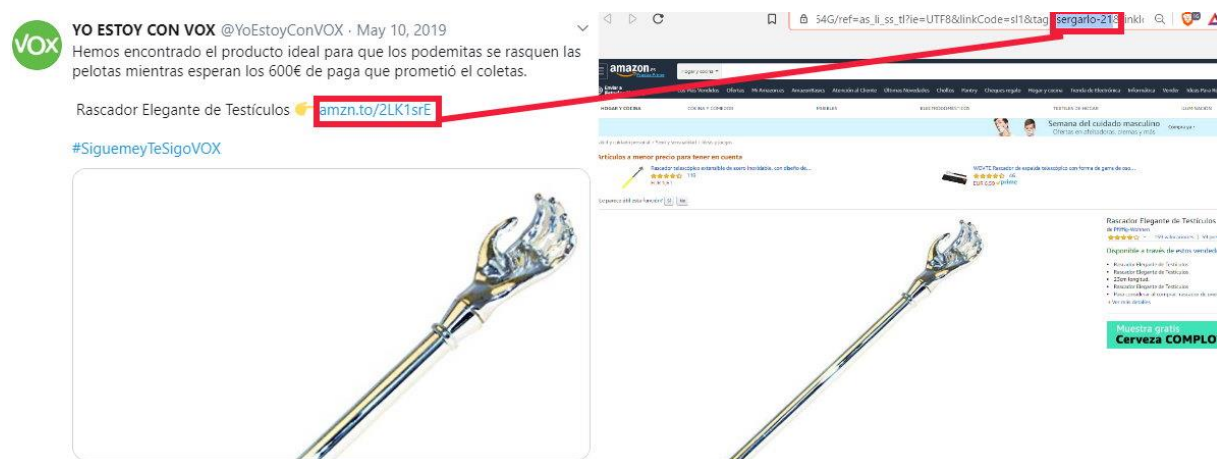


Figure 39 @YoEstoyConVox Twitter account promoting a ball scratcher for podemites, with the profit directly going to "Sergarlo" Amazon associate



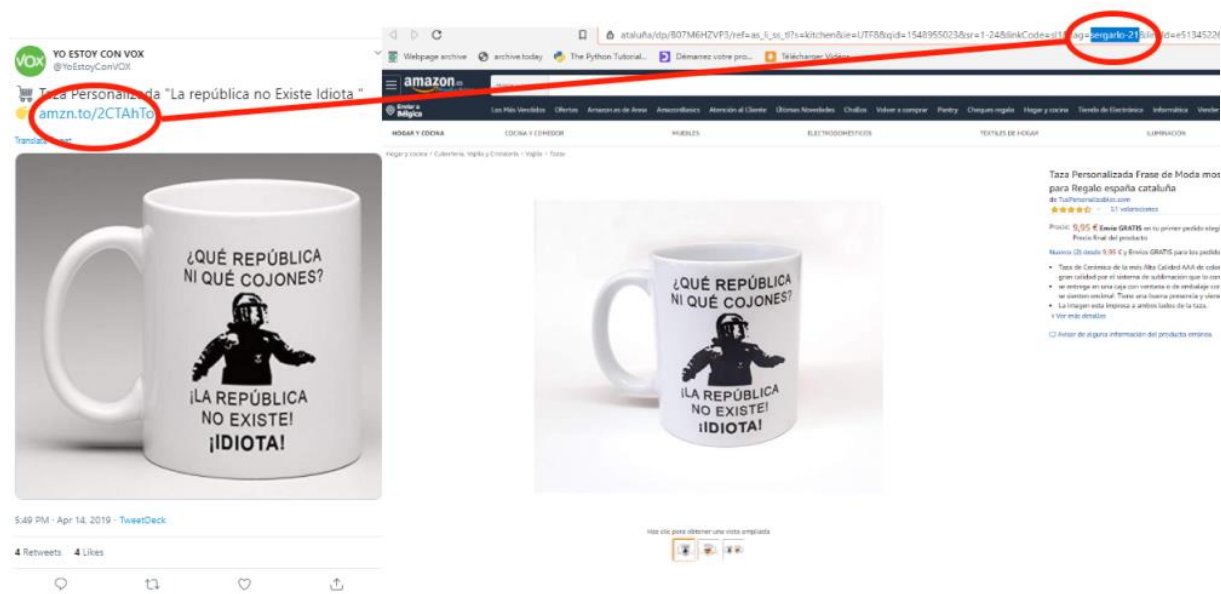


Figure 40 YoEstoyConVox promoting the sale of a patriotic mug, referencing to an episode that happened during demonstrations in Catalonia.<sup>30</sup> Money goes to "Sergarlo" tracking ID



Figure 41 YoEstoyConVox account promotes anti-Islam disinformation and plays on Christian pride by selling a Playmobil Christmas Crib

The account @YoEstoyConVox became @Jose\_CasadoVOX in early March 2020. All the tweets previously shared by @YoEstoyConVox still appear on the timeline of the account. This deceptive technique gives the impression the politician starts with a high audience.

<sup>30</sup>It was a mediatic incident in late December 2018. A member of the regional police force of Catalonia (the Mossos de Escudra confronted another agent (a forest worker) in a demonstration and asked him what he was doing there, and when he replied that he was there for the republic, the first officer told him that the republic did not exist. The scene transcended the media and social networks, and the "mosso" became a symbol of the anti-independentists.



It is possible to go to an archive version of a Twitter account and carry out a source code search for "similar\_to\_user\_id" in the source code. The adjoining number is the Twitter ID of the account. Thereafter, you can then run this Twitter ID in <https://tweeterid.com/> and see what the new name of the account is. We used this technique to get the proof that @YoEstoyConVox and @Jose\_casadoVOX were the same account. (Here is an instance with another account)



Figure 42 The new name of @YoEstoyConVox is @Jose\_CasadoVOX but displays the very same links and tweets

## Amazon links on @Verdaderalqda

The amount of Amazon links shared by @Verdaderalqda is huge. Approximately 2,050 Amazon links were shared by this account between the 1<sup>st</sup> and the 27<sup>th</sup> February 2020. All the ones we clicked on contained one of the tracking IDs connected to Sergarlo (including "Totatria", "Sergarlo", "Codesergarlo".)

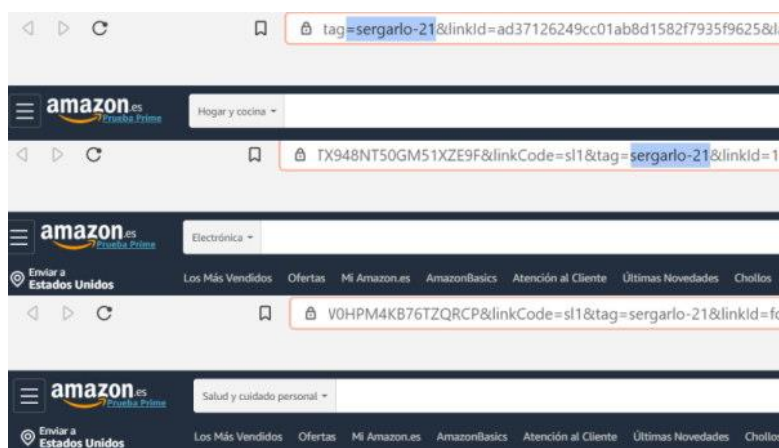


Figure 43 In these three Amazon links, all clicked from La Verdadera Izquierda Twitter account, one can see "Sergarlo" appear in the URL

The three first tweets with Amazon links all use the code "totatria".<sup>31</sup>

## An example of the amplification of Amazon links

During our investigation, we came across a specific Amazon URL posted by La Verdadera Izquierda. This offer, linked to "Sergarlo" Associate ID, promoted a free subscription to Amazon Kindle service during the lockdown.

<sup>31</sup>Most probably the abbreviation for "Total Triathlon", as it seems Sergarlo started to monetise his account through Amazon links with the creation of "Total Triathlon" website.



Figure 44 - Sample of Amazon Affiliate link posted on la Verdadera Izquierda, and linked to Sergarlo affiliation ID

In order to estimate the amplification of this link, we searched through Crowdtangle for other public occurrences of this specific link. We were able to find out that the link had been posted 42 times on 3 Facebook pages: La Verdadera Izquierda, Orgullo Nacional, and Yo soy de Vox. On Twitter, we found 78 tweets mentioning this specific link.

<div> <div>Facebook 42</div> <div>Instagram</div> <div>Reddit</div> <div>Twitter</div> </div>			
WHO SHARED THIS LINK?		MESSAGE	INTERACTIONS
<div>VOX</div> <div>Yo soy de VOX</div> <div>42,384 Page Likes</div>		<div>Aprovecha estos días de confinamiento para disfrutar del placer de la lectura con 2 meses gratis de Amazon Kindle Unlimited 📖 amzn.to/33VO1ds=:https://www.amazon.es/kindle-dbs/hz/subscribe/ku/ref=as_li_ss_tl?&amp;linkCode=sl2&amp;</div>	16
<div>Orgullo Nacional España</div> <div>43,672 Page Likes</div>		<div>Aprovecha estos días de confinamiento para disfrutar del placer de la lectura con 2 meses gratis de Amazon Kindle Unlimited 📖 amzn.to/33VO1ds=:https://www.amazon.es/kindle-dbs/hz/subscribe/ku/ref=as_li_ss_tl?&amp;linkCode=sl2&amp;</div>	4
<div>VOX</div> <div>Yo soy de VOX</div> <div>42,539 Page Likes</div>		<div>Aprovecha estos días de confinamiento para disfrutar del placer de la lectura con 2 meses gratis de Amazon Kindle Unlimited 📖 amzn.to/33VO1ds=:https://www.amazon.es/kindle-dbs/hz/subscribe/ku/ref=as_li_ss_tl?&amp;linkCode=sl2&amp;tag=sergarlo-</div>	19
<div>Orgullo Nacional España</div> <div>43,683 Page Likes</div>		<div>Aprovecha estos días de confinamiento para disfrutar del placer de la lectura con 2 meses gratis de Amazon Kindle Unlimited 📖 amzn.to/33VO1ds=:https://www.amazon.es/kindle-dbs/hz/subscribe/ku/ref=as_li_ss_tl?&amp;linkCode=sl2&amp;tag=sergarlo-</div>	2
<div>Orgullo Nacional España</div> <div>43,689 Page Likes</div>		<div>Aprovecha estos días de confinamiento para disfrutar del placer de la lectura con 2 meses gratis de Amazon Kindle Unlimited 📖 amzn.to/33VO1ds=:https://www.amazon.es/kindle-dbs/hz/subscribe/ku/ref=as_li_ss_tl?&amp;linkCode=sl2&amp;tag=sergarlo-</div>	4
<div>VOX</div> <div>Yo soy de VOX</div> <div>42,593 Page Likes</div>		<div>Aprovecha estos días de confinamiento para disfrutar del placer de la lectura con 2 meses gratis de Amazon Kindle Unlimited 📖 amzn.to/33VO1ds=:https://www.amazon.es/kindle-dbs/hz/subscribe/ku/ref=as_li_ss_tl?&amp;linkCode=sl2&amp;tag=sergarlo-</div>	15
<div>VOX</div> <div>Yo soy de VOX</div> <div>42,617 Page Likes</div>		<div>Aprovecha estos días de confinamiento para disfrutar del placer de la lectura con 2 meses gratis de Amazon Kindle Unlimited 📖 amzn.to/33VO1ds=:https://www.amazon.es/kindle-dbs/hz/subscribe/ku/ref=as_li_ss_tl?&amp;linkCode=sl2&amp;tag=sergarlo-</div>	18

Figure 45 - Amplification of the Amazon links on Facebook pages of the network

Tweets number

Tweets

78

Retweets

40

Likes

20

Propagation timeline

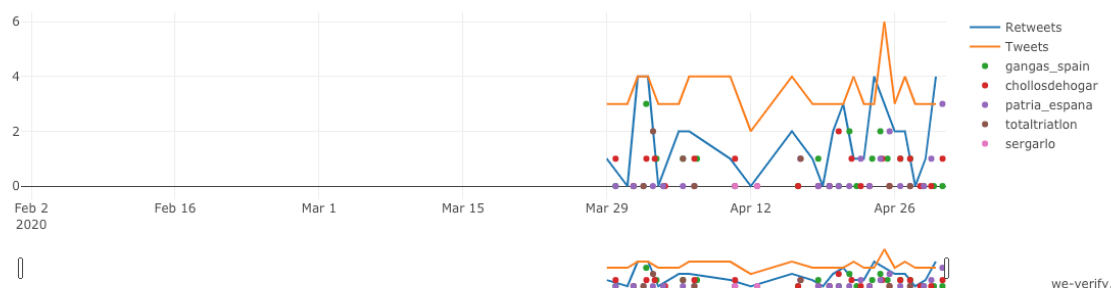


Figure 46 - Twitter amplification of this specific Amazon link (source: WeVerify)

On this very specific case, we can see that the network of accounts has been actively promoting an Amazon link beneficial for its owner.

## The Amazon Associates program

In a 2019 note on his blog, Sergarlo says he has been a member of the Amazon Associates program for more than three years and complains of the fee changes in the program. In this blogpost, he says *"Although at first I did not know how to get the most out of it, I eventually began to earn some money through promoting different products through social networks"*.<sup>32</sup>

Three years before 2019 sends us back to 2015, which seems make sense when considered in light of two other pieces of information:

- Total Triathlon website was launched in September 2015<sup>33</sup> and the first featured product had an Amazon link pointing to ID "totatria" (appearing on Web Archive<sup>34</sup>).
- On the Sergarlo YouTube channel, the first occurrence of an Amazon link was the 26 January 2016,<sup>35</sup> which had the "totatria" Amazon link.
- La Verdadera Izquierda's Twitter account shared its first Amazon link on the 25th November 2016, with the ID "totatria".

## What is the Amazon Associates program?

Amazon Associates program is method of making money by promoting links to Amazon.

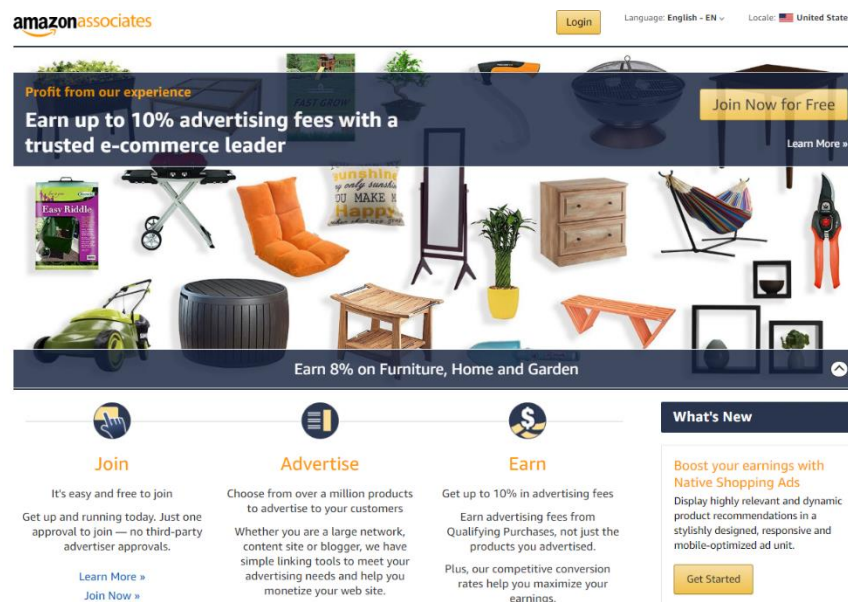


Figure 47 The Amazon Associates homepage

<sup>32</sup><https://web.archive.org/web/20200227095829/http://www.sergarlo.com/2019/03/Amazon-hiere-de-muerte-su-programa-de.html>

<sup>33</sup><https://web.archive.org/web/20150910021517/http://totaltriatlon.com/>

<sup>34</sup><https://web.archive.org/web/20151128053207/http://totaltriatlon.com/polar-m400/>

<sup>35</sup>On YouTube <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0rZmreFIDzo> or saved here: <https://archive.ph/wtwWv>



If a customer goes to Amazon via a link promoted by the Associate, the Associate will receive a percentage of the sale, depending on the product.<sup>36</sup>

There is a reviewing process according to the following criteria:<sup>37</sup>

*After you sign up, our Associates team will check your application once you've driven qualified sales (we require at least three within the first 180 days). Please note that personal orders do not qualify. In our review, we check all the Sites you've provided (websites, mobile apps, and social network pages) to ensure that they meet our customer experience bar. All Sites must have robust original content (even when advertising is removed) – a good rule of thumb is at least 10 posts. They must be publicly available (for example, they should not be a closed group, or behind a paywall). Unsuitable Sites cannot participate under any circumstance.*

A list of forbidden websites details the following:<sup>38</sup>

*Unsuitable Sites include those that:*

*(a) promote or contain sexually explicit or obscene materials,*

*(b) promote violence or contain violent materials,*

*(c) promote or contain false, deceptive, libellous or defamatory materials,*

*(d) promote or contain materials or activity that is hateful, harassing, harmful, invasive of another's privacy, abusive, or discriminatory (including on the basis of race, colour, sex, religion, nationality, disability, sexual orientation, or age),*

*(e) promote or undertake illegal activities,*

*(f) are directed toward children or knowingly collect, use, or disclose personal information from children under 13 years of age or other applicable age threshold (as defined by applicable laws and regulations); or violate any applicable laws, ordinances, rules, regulations, orders, licenses, permits, guidelines, codes of practice, industry standards, self-regulatory rules, judgments, decisions, or other requirements of any applicable governmental authority related to child protection (for example, if applicable, the Children's Online Privacy Protection Act (15 U.S.C. §§ 6501-6506) or any regulations promulgated thereunder or the Children's Online Protection Act);*

*(g) include any trademark of Amazon or its affiliates, or a variant or misspelling of a trademark of Amazon or its affiliates in any domain name, subdomain name, in any "tag" or Associates ID, or in any username, group name, or other identifier on any social networking*

---

<sup>36</sup>Here is the table of fee rates <https://affiliate-program.Amazon.com/help/node/topic/GRXPHT8U84RAYDXZ>

<sup>37</sup>[https://affiliate-program.Amazon.com/help/node/topic/G8TW5AE9XL2VX9VM/ref=amb\\_link\\_8Ncmk8gvR5qAgFrY3\\_OHEw\\_2?pf\\_rd\\_p=6d0ebe3c-3201-48b1-8dfe-d769db85d3b9](https://affiliate-program.Amazon.com/help/node/topic/G8TW5AE9XL2VX9VM/ref=amb_link_8Ncmk8gvR5qAgFrY3_OHEw_2?pf_rd_p=6d0ebe3c-3201-48b1-8dfe-d769db85d3b9)

<sup>38</sup><https://affiliate-program.Amazon.com/help/operating/policies#Associates%20Program%20Participation%20Requirements>



site (see a non-exhaustive list of our trademarks listed on our Non-Exhaustive Trademark Table);

However, these prohibitions seem easy to bypass. It is unclear if Amazon only checks the first website or if it check all websites. It is also unclear if Amazon checks where the Amazon Associate links are displayed.

Arguably, Amazon promotes it as by advising to create multiple tracking IDs, without requiring the ID to be tied to a reviewed website *“it is a good idea to set up a tracking ID for each of your sites to see which of your websites generates what part of your proceeds.”*<sup>39</sup>

It is thus entirely possible to enter into the Associates program with one website, for instance, “Total Triatlon” and then to use the program to monetise other websites or accounts, such as “La Verdadera Izquierda”.

To do this, users need to set up different ID trackers. It is not necessary, but it is good to track record.

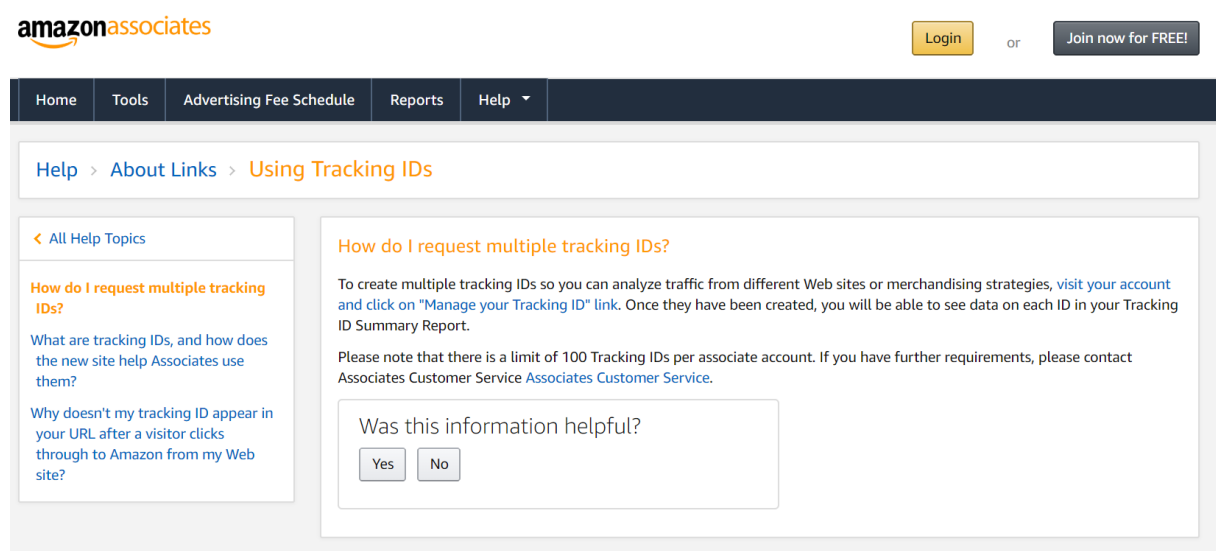


Figure 48 Amazon Associate help page explaining how to create multiple tracking ID

The tracking ID then appears in the URL in this section: “linkCode=s11&tag=totatria-21&linkId”

From browsing various Amazon links shared by all Sergarlo accounts, we were able to identify the following IDs:

- Totatria (probably for Total Triatlon);
- Codesergarlo (for Sergarlo);

<sup>39</sup><https://Amazon-affiliate.eu/en/about-the-programme/faq/#Can%20I%20use%20the%20Amazon%20Associate%20program%20on%20more%20than%20one%20of%20my%20websites?>

- Sergarlo (again for Sergarlo);
- \*\*globo (his relative);
- Txuso, and
- Voxfb (This specific one used by the @YoEstoyConVox and @Patria\_Espana accounts).

Sergarlo has been using all these tracking IDs interchangeably. We found "totatria" links shared by @YoEstoyConVox, "Sergarlo" links shared by @Patria\_Espana; "\*\*globo" links shared by La Verdadera Izquierda. In addition, we also found that the Facebook page Orgullo Nacional Espana had sometimes shared publications from the Todo Para Tu Bebe Facebook page – a page operated by a relative which shared Amazon links with the codes "sergarlo" or "txuso".



Figure 49 Orgullo Nacional Espana Facebook page sharing the Todo Para Tu Bebe Facebook page, which is operated by Sergarlo's relative. Here you can see that the pages share monetised Amazon links connected to Sergarlo's tracking ID

Even further, La Verdadera Izquierda, on its "advertising" page, specifically asks its supporters to "help us by making purchases through our Amazon Affiliate link" (pointing to the "totatria" tracker ID), and claims that all money will go to the "patriotic cause".<sup>40</sup>

<sup>40</sup><https://web.archive.org/web/20200303104540/https://verdaderaizquierda.blogspot.com/p/publicidad.html>

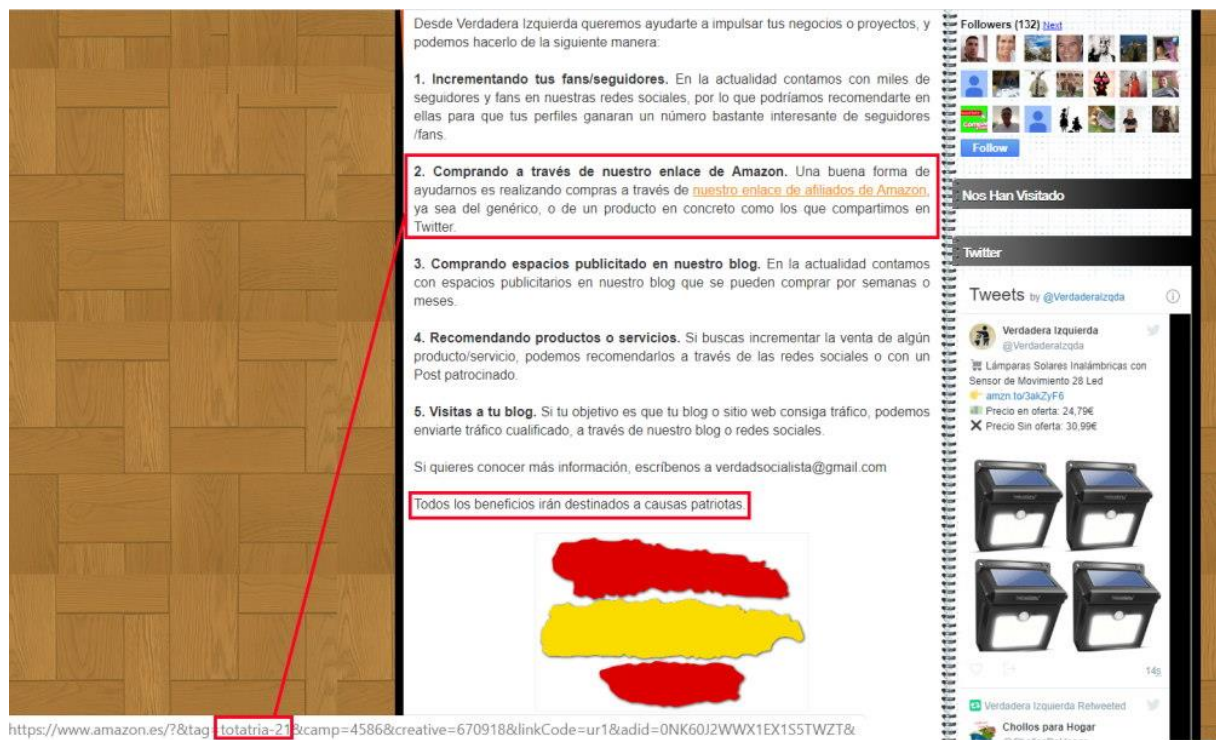


Figure 50 La Verdadera Izquierda's advertising page where the "totatria" Amazon affiliate account is "used to fund the website La Verdadera Izquierda and the "patriotic cause"

In this particular case, we see how one can end up support funding the "patriotic cause" from la Verdadera Izquierda just by clicking on monetised links disseminated through the network of Twitter accounts and Facebook pages we described. Although La Verdadera Izquierda, @Patria\_Espana and @YoEstoyConVox could be considered "unsuitable websites," according to Amazon's own policies, they seem to be openly used to make money via the Amazon Associates program by using two different techniques:

- Advertisements to buy products feeding into far-right narratives, nationalistic pride or far right jokes.
- Using disinformation in general as clickbait or for populating accounts and attracting users to monetised links.

## Conclusion and Recommendations

This case shows how disinformation can be used for political purposes together with monetisation. The basic model for monetisation is quite similar to what we see in other cases of disinformation monetisation, such as in the Suavelos case,<sup>41</sup> and the Africa24 case.<sup>42</sup> It uses two techniques:

- Disinformation as clickbait: attracting users with fake or unverified polarising content and sending them to monetised links or webpages.
- “Alternative news” narrative and extremist content, following a general trend of the monetisation of alternative news narrative witnessed in other disinformation cases.

In this case, the Amazon Associates program plays a key role by furnishing a constant flow of monetised links usable by disinformation actors due to its very weak verification system. Another problem is the lack of publicity and transparency surrounding the Amazon Associates program.

It is very difficult to identify an Amazon Associate link if one does not know about the tracking ID in the URL. The disappearance of the tracker ID when surfing through Amazon makes it hard for someone to know if they are financing external actors, as a consequence of their participation in the Amazon Associates program.

We invite Amazon to look into this case and to reflect upon how its Associates programme can be used to fund disinformation online.

---

<sup>41</sup><https://www.disinfo.eu/publications/suavelos-white-supremacists-funded-through-facebook>

<sup>42</sup><https://www.disinfo.eu/publications/from-health-disinformation-to-copy-pasting-articles-from-sputnik-and-rt-how-an-africa-based-network-built-fake-media-outlets-and-clickbait-websites-for-profit>