

# Covid-19

## Disinformation

### and social media manipulation



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## Automating influence on Covid-19

### Introduction

ASPI ICPC has investigated a campaign of cross-platform inauthentic activity, conducted by Chinese-speaking actors and broadly in alignment with the political goal of the People's Republic of China (PRC) to denigrate the standing of the US. This appears to be targeted primarily at Western and US-based audiences by artificially boosting legitimate media and social media content in order to amplify divisive or negative narratives about the US. This has included highlighting racial tensions, amplifying criticisms of the US's handling of the coronavirus crisis, and political and personal scandals linked to President Donald Trump. However, there's no clear indication of a partisan lean in this campaign. President Trump appears to be criticised in his capacity as a leader of the US rather than as a presidential candidate.

This activity has been conducted primarily in English, with a smaller amount of Chinese-language content. It relies on a high degree of automation and appears to have achieved low engagement across both Facebook and Twitter. The divergent tactics used in this campaign suggest that's unconnected to the state-linked operations studied by ASPI ICPC in *[Tweeting through the Great Firewall](#)* and *[Retweeting through the Great Firewall](#)*. There's no clear actor—state or non-state—to which attribution can be made from this investigation. It does appear that those behind the campaign commonly type in *[double-byte fonts](#)* used for Asian languages, including Chinese, and that a small number of accounts appear to have been used in an earlier campaign targeting the Falun Gong / Falun Dafa community in the US.

This activity is valuable as a case study because it highlights the ways in which social media platforms provide a vector for small-scale actors to engage in covert political influence campaigns targeting citizens and voters in other nations in ways that can complement state-driven propaganda. The investigation offers insights into behavioural patterns that can reveal coordinated inauthentic activity designed to drive influence, even when it is disguised through selective sharing of authentic content by accounts with profiles that offer a veneer of legitimacy.

### Overview of the activity

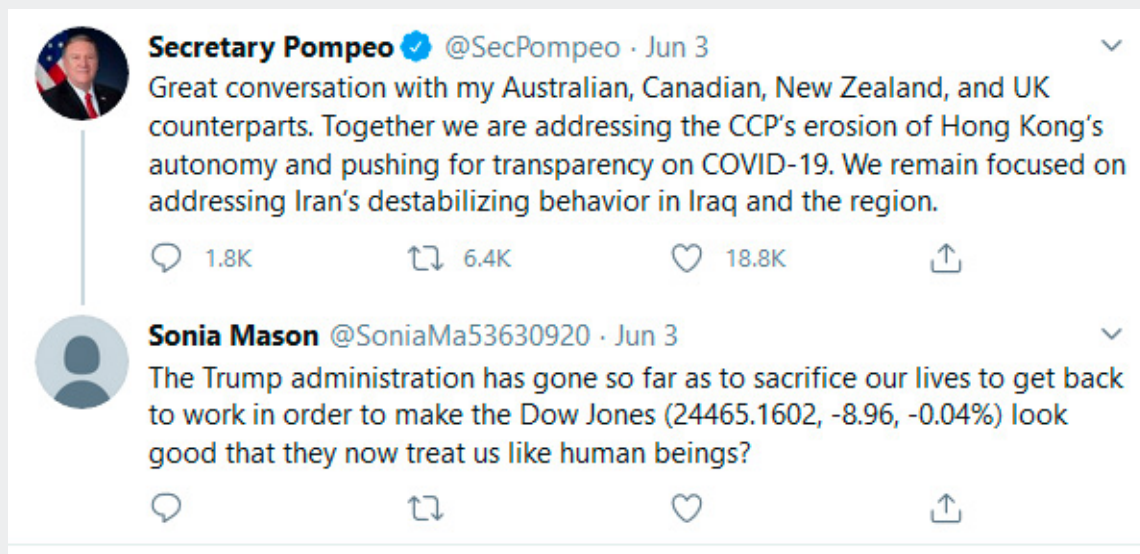
Our investigation uncovered a network of at least 62 accounts on Facebook and between 200 and 300 accounts on Twitter<sup>1</sup> posting, sharing or retweeting identical content as part of this activity, which dates back to at least February 2020. A significant number of accounts previously involved in the activity appear to have been deleted, suggesting that the overall number of accounts that have been involved in this operation is likely to be higher.

This isn't a sophisticated campaign. No attempt has been made to build convincing personas for the accounts involved, which appear to rely on a high level of automation. Rather than actively spreading disinformation, this campaign instead seeks to highlight authentic content about divisions and grievances in American society, using a relatively unsophisticated approach based on that high degree of automation.

Standard activity involves sharing a legitimate news article or tweet, usually from a US media source, along with a short English-language comment that emphasises negative sentiment. The same content is shared repeatedly across both Facebook and Twitter by multiple accounts, sometimes multiple times by the same account or over a period of weeks.

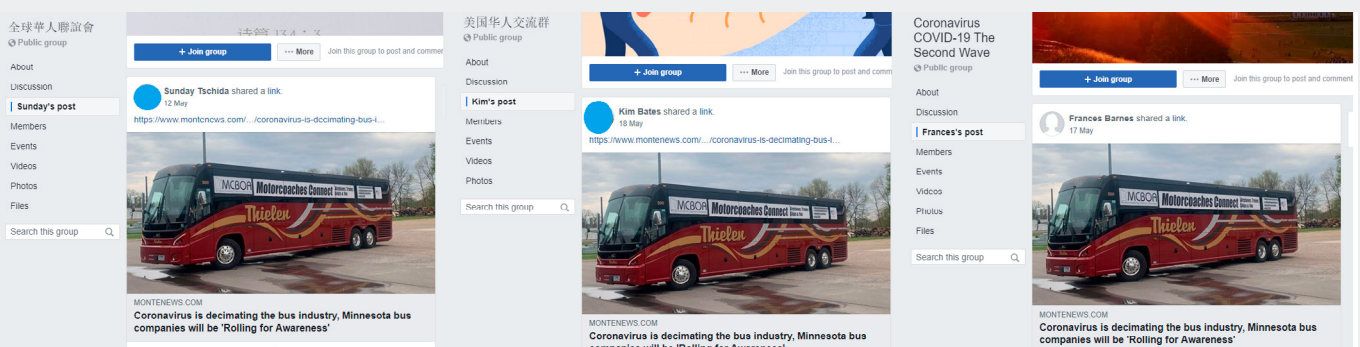
Some accounts in this campaign reply to tweets from high-profile US accounts, in particular those of President Trump and Secretary of State Mike Pompeo (Figure 1). Many also simply share or retweet content on specific themes, providing an inauthentic boost to otherwise authentic news and content. This approach highlights that campaigns to influence, even manipulate, social media audiences do not necessarily have to rely on disinformation. Such campaigns can simply selectively amplify legitimate content – such as tweets from authentic users or articles from genuine news outlets – to shape narrative and drive influence. This approach can be enhanced by using account names and profile pictures that have been selected to create a veneer of legitimacy (as appears to have been the case for some of the accounts in this campaign).

**Figure 1: A tweet in this campaign replying to US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo, captured 13 July 2020**



Additionally, a small number of Facebook accounts appear to have been sharing legitimate, critical news stories into Facebook groups, including Covid-19 discussion groups and groups for Chinese-Americans (Figure 2). Changes to Facebook's Graph search function make it difficult to establish how widespread this behaviour is.

**Figure 2: Accounts involved in the activity sharing an article about the impact of the Covid-19 crisis on the Minnesota bus industry into Facebook groups, captured 20 June 2020**



The following sections discuss the content and narratives amplified by this activity. That's followed by an analysis of the tactics and techniques employed, including high levels of automation across both platforms.

## Content and narratives

Key narratives have included emphasising racial divisions, criticising the US's response to the coronavirus, and political and electoral themes.

### Emphasising racial divisions

The role of racial divisions and inequality in the US is a major theme of the activity. A typical example is a video that was tweeted out on 10 June 2020 by US media outlet *Now This News*, showing a black protester standing up to a white counter-protester (Figure 3). This tweet was shared repeatedly over the course of a month across both Twitter and Facebook alongside the text 'Black people are never slaves! Stand up your high head!' (note the spacing around the punctuation marks, which indicates the use of a double-byte font; highlighting added). On Twitter, it was shared at least 43 times (Figure 4).

Figure 3: Twitter retweets, captured 13 July 2020



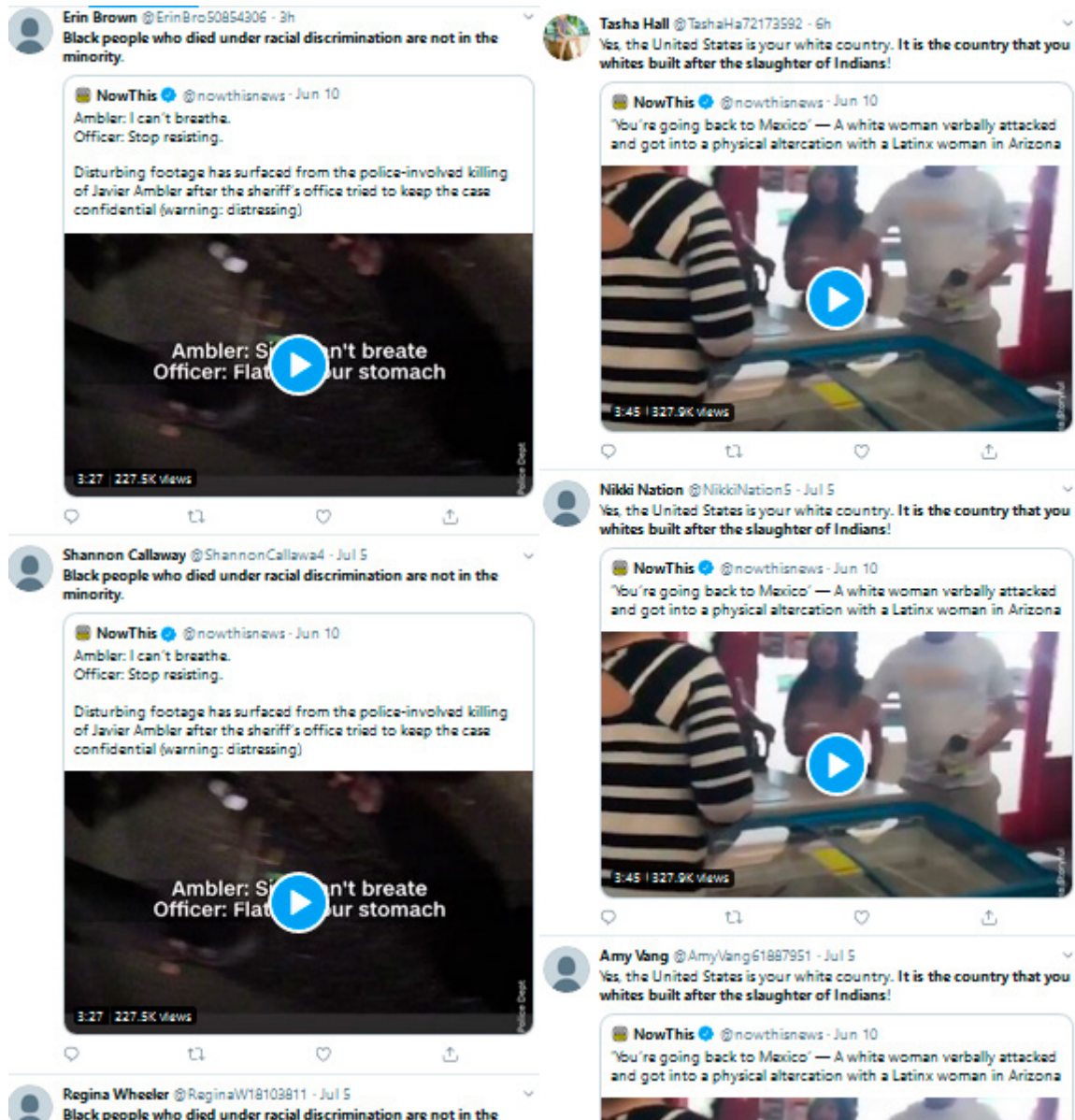
Figure 4: Facebook posts, showing same account sharing @NowThisNews tweet with the same text on the same day, captured 13 July 2020



Other videos tweeted by *Now This News* on the same day, 10 June, were highlighted in a similar way in an apparent attempt to exacerbate racial divisions (Figure 5). It isn't clear why multiple videos from this particular day were chosen as the foundation for at least a month's worth of activity; there may have been some specific reason, or it may simply have been that that was the day they went looking for fodder to build their activity around.



Figure 5: Twitter retweets, captured 13 July 2020



Other legitimate content shared by the campaign and highlighting racial divisions and inequality in the US included articles from major US-based media, such as the *New York Times*, *MSNBC* and others, and tweets from civil rights groups (Figure 6).

Figure 6: Tweets sharing *New York Times* and *MSNBC* articles, captured 13 July 2020



The ongoing protests in response to the killing of George Floyd and the broader Black Lives Matter movement have been used as a way to highlight division in US society. In terms of narrative, this complements overt messaging from PRC [state media](#) and [Ministry of Foreign Affairs](#), as well as from campaigns of [covert propaganda and disinformation](#). Accounts involved in the activity have boosted content from both sides of the protests. For example, the same account has retweeted both an anti-police account and a pro-police, 'Blue Lives Matter' tweet (Figure 7).

Figure 7: 'Blue Lives Matter' retweet, captured 14 July 2020



### Criticising the US's response to Covid-19


Another major focus of the activity has revolved around amplifying legitimate coverage and media content about the US's response to the Covid-19 pandemic, illustrating how smaller-scale campaigns have learnt from the techniques used by more sophisticated state actors. This has included highlighting the rising death toll or specific clusters and outbreaks, as well as dog-whistling towards conspiracy theories that the virus originated in the Fort Detrick lab in Maryland (again echoing PRC [state-sponsored messaging](#)).

The 'Fort Detrick' theory purports to reveal that the Covid-19 virus originated from a US military base. A legitimate [article](#) published in August 2019 has been shared by accounts in our sample at least 20 times on Twitter and was first [shared](#) in 2020 by the 'All Things Chinese' account. Among tweets relating to Chinese history, art and culture, this account regularly comments on Australian-Chinese [affairs](#), too.

A [petition](#) asking the US government to reveal the 'real' reason behind the Fort Detrick closure has also been shared at least 16 times so far by accounts connected to this campaign on Twitter (Figure 8).


Figure 8: Accounts retweeting an authentic article and petition

**Karen Shine** @KarenSh53530116 · Jul 9  
**Fort Detrick lab shut down after failed safety inspection;** all research halted indefinitely [fredericknewspost.com/news/health/fo...](https://fredericknewspost.com/news/health/fo...) via @frednewspost



Fort Detrick lab shut down after failed safety inspection; all research halt... All research at a Fort Detrick laboratory that handles high-level disease-causing material, such as Ebola, is on hold indefinitely after the Centers ...  
 @fredericknewspost.com

**Terri Mullins** @TerriMu35041809 · Jul 9  
**Fort Detrick lab shut down after failed safety inspection;** all research halted indefinitely



Fort Detrick lab shut down after failed safety inspection; all research halt... All research at a Fort Detrick laboratory that handles high-level disease-causing material, such as Ebola, is on hold indefinitely after the Centers ...  
 @fredericknewspost.com

Search: **【The White House】Petition for information of Fort Detri**

Top Latest People Photos Videos

**Erica Martin** @EricaMa73540803 · Jul 8  
**【The White House】Petition for information of Fort Detrick**  
[petitions.whitehouse.gov/petition/petit...](https://petitions.whitehouse.gov/petition/petit...)

**Nancy Carraway** @NancyCarraway5 · Jul 8  
**【The White House】Petition for information of Fort Detrick**  
[petitions.whitehouse.gov/petition/petit...](https://petitions.whitehouse.gov/petition/petit...)

**Nicole Johnson** @NicoleJ74086336 · Jul 8  
**【The White House】Petition for information of Fort Detrick**  
[petitions.whitehouse.gov/petition/petit...](https://petitions.whitehouse.gov/petition/petit...)

**Amanda Wilson** @AmandaW56781682 · Jul 8  
**【The White House】Petition for information of Fort Detrick**  
[petitions.whitehouse.gov/petition/petit...](https://petitions.whitehouse.gov/petition/petit...)

**Nikki Nation** @NikkiNation5 · Jul 8  
**【The White House】Petition for information of Fort Detrick**  
[petitions.whitehouse.gov/petition/petit...](https://petitions.whitehouse.gov/petition/petit...)

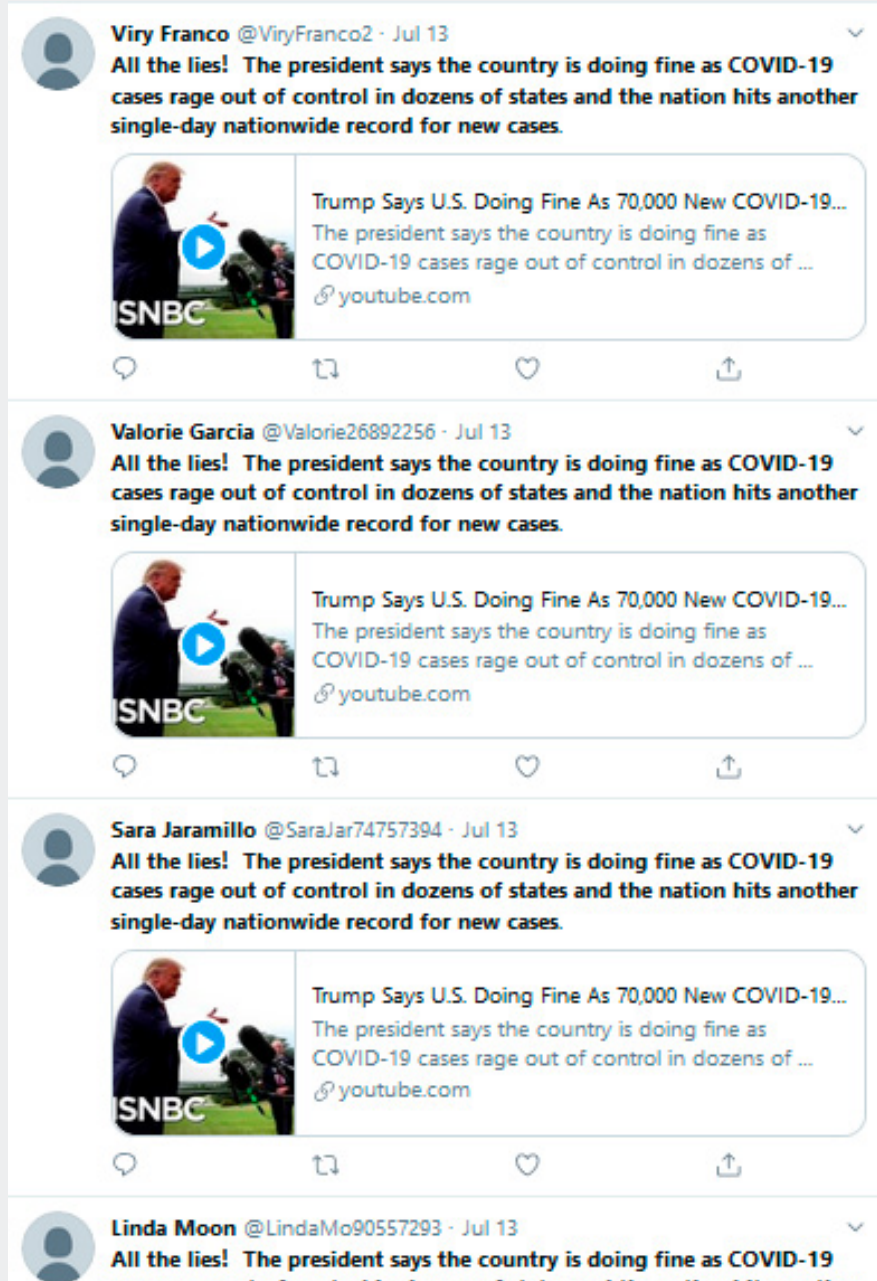
**Cynthia White** @Cynthia05141642 · Jul 8  
**【The White House】Petition for information of Fort Detrick**  
[petitions.whitehouse.gov/petition/petit...](https://petitions.whitehouse.gov/petition/petit...)

**Melissa Pierson** @MelissaPierson · Jul 8  
**【The White House】Petition for information of Fort Detrick**  
[petitions.whitehouse.gov/petition/petit...](https://petitions.whitehouse.gov/petition/petit...)

In another example, an *MSNBC* video posted to YouTube on 10 July was shared across the accounts on Twitter on July 13th, alongside text critical of President Trump's comments on the Covid-19 crisis (Figure 9).



Figure 9: Tweets sharing *MSNBC* YouTube video, captured 14 July 2020



Other examples included mockery of President Trump's highly controversial comments about disinfectant as a treatment for the virus, and of the Trump administration's decision to continue deporting immigrants despite the possibility that they could already be infected with the virus and therefore risk spreading it to their home countries (figures 10 and 11).



Figure 10: Tweets amplifying legitimate content critical of the Trump administration's handling of the Covid-19 pandemic, captured 14 July 2020

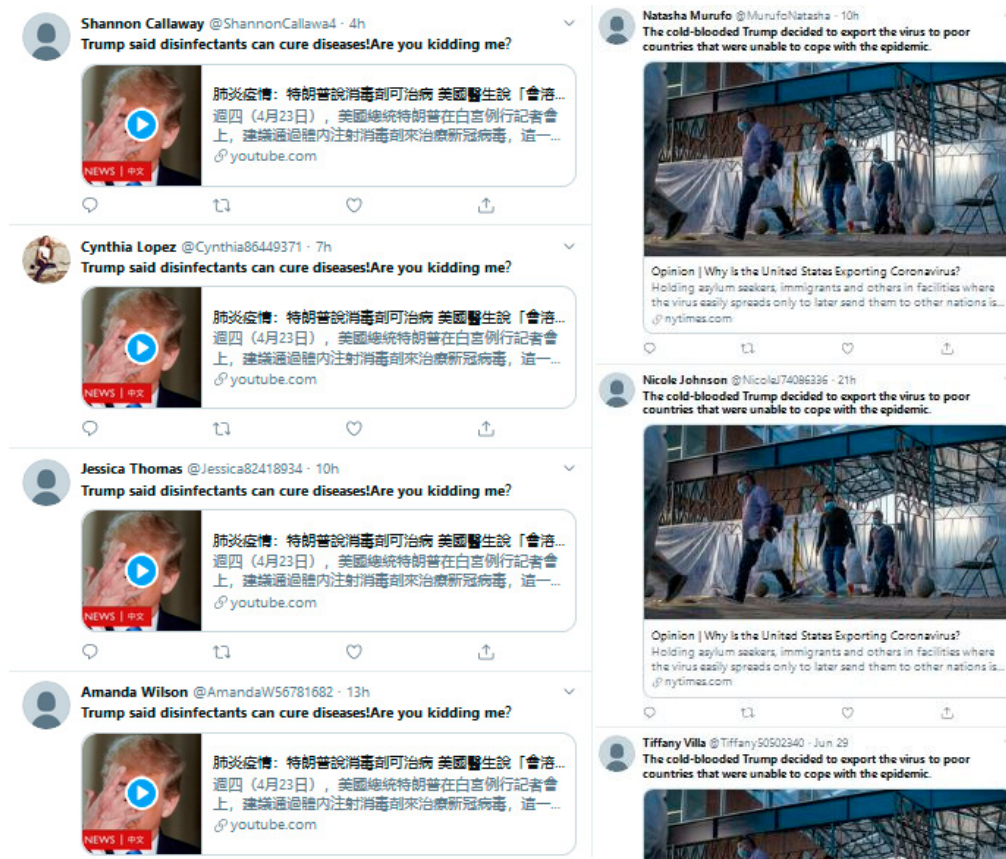


Figure 11: Facebook posts amplifying legitimate content critical of the Trump administration's handling of the Covid-19 pandemic, captured 14 July 2020



Additional evidence to suggest that the operators of these accounts are working primarily in Chinese language comes from some of the shared articles in which Chinese characters are present within predominantly English-language text (Figure 12).

Figure 12: Tweet including 来自 ('from') in Chinese, captured 14 July 2020



American cultural attitudes have been highlighted as contributing to the spread of the virus, including through the 'overflow of freedom' and people's unwillingness to wear masks (figures 13, 14 and 15).

Figure 13: Reply to Secretary of State Pompeo, captured 30 June 2020



Figure 14: Reply to President Trump, captured 14 July 2020

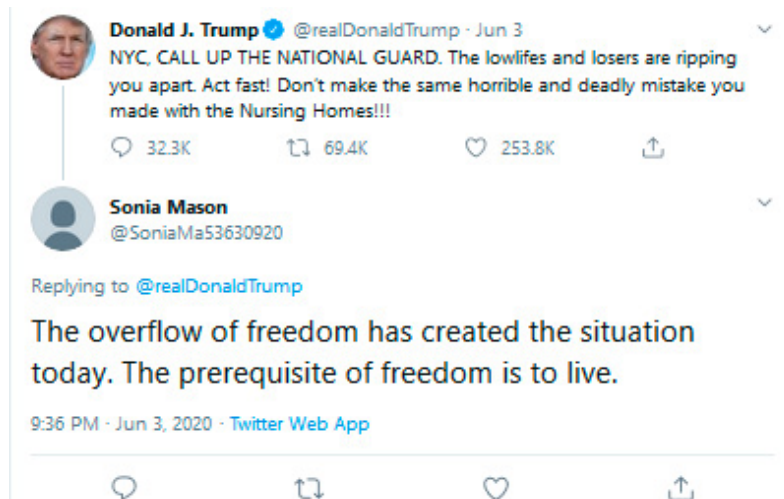
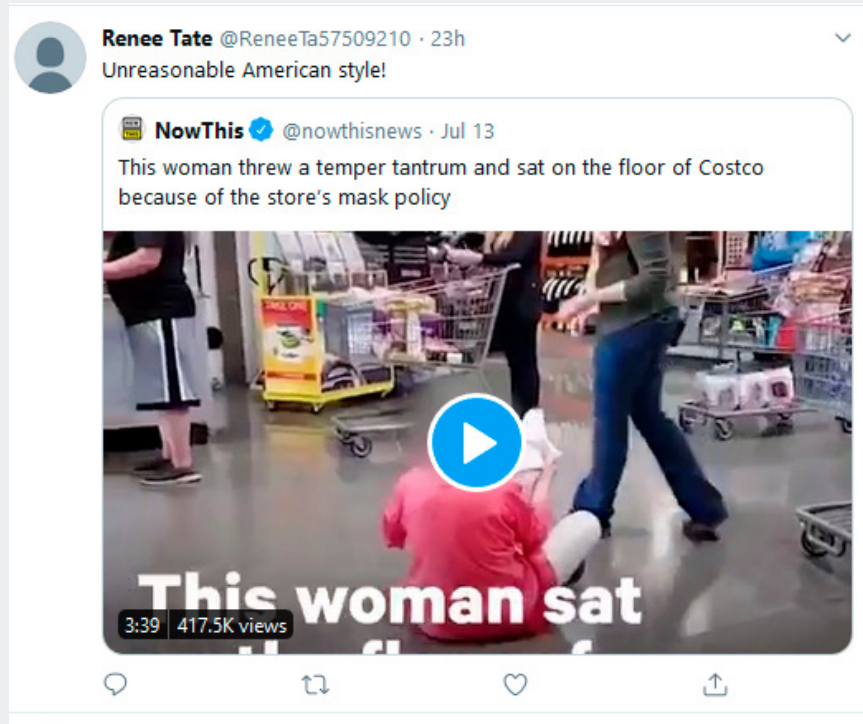


Figure 15: Tweet, captured 14 July 2020




### Political and electoral themes

Narratives relating to US domestic politics, President Trump, his administration and the upcoming US presidential election have also been a prominent feature of the activity. The largest proportion of this has been sharing and commenting on legitimate media coverage that highlights personal scandals associated with President Trump or irresponsible behaviour by the President and his administration (figures 16 and 17).




Figure 16: (L) Tweets sharing a Chinese-language video about personal scandals associated with President Trump, captured 30 June 2020; (R) Facebook posts sharing a [tweet](#) about a forthcoming book written by Trump's niece, which is highly critical of Trump, captured 30 June 2020








**Megan Lewis** @MeganLe30515138 · 18h

When Trump was asked about sex scandals, he drove reporters out of anger!




追问婚外情丑闻被激怒 特朗普驱赶CNN记者  
美国总统特朗普向来与媒体关系不好，更常常指控有线电视新闻网CNN报道对他不公。星期三，一名CNN记...  
[youtube.com](#)








**Viry Franco** @ViryFranco2 · 20h

When Trump was asked about sex scandals, he drove reporters out of anger!




追问婚外情丑闻被激怒 特朗普驱赶CNN记者  
美国总统特朗普向来与媒体关系不好，更常常指控有线电视新闻网CNN报道对他不公。星期三，一名CNN记...  
[youtube.com](#)




**Valorie Garcia** @Valorie26892256 · 20h

When Trump was asked about sex scandals, he drove reporters out of anger!




追问婚外情丑闻被激怒 特朗普驱赶CNN记者  
美国总统特朗普向来与媒体关系不好，更常常指控有线电视新闻网CNN报道对他不公。星期三，一名CNN记...  
[youtube.com](#)




**Stephanie Robertson**

Jun 20 · 🌐 · Revenge the family civil war with presidential privileges?! This is Trump, the current president of the United States![https://twitter.com/AshaRangappa\\_/status/1272337474547826694](https://twitter.com/AshaRangappa_/status/1272337474547826694)




**Tiffany Sims**

Jun 19 · 🌐 · Revenge the family civil war with presidential privileges?! This is Trump, the current president of the United States![https://twitter.com/AshaRangappa\\_/status/1272337474547826694](https://twitter.com/AshaRangappa_/status/1272337474547826694)




**Jasmine Campbell**

Jun 18 · 🌐 · Revenge the family civil war with presidential privileges?! This is Trump, the current president of the United States![https://twitter.com/AshaRangappa\\_/status/1272337474547826694](https://twitter.com/AshaRangappa_/status/1272337474547826694)



**Princesita Love**

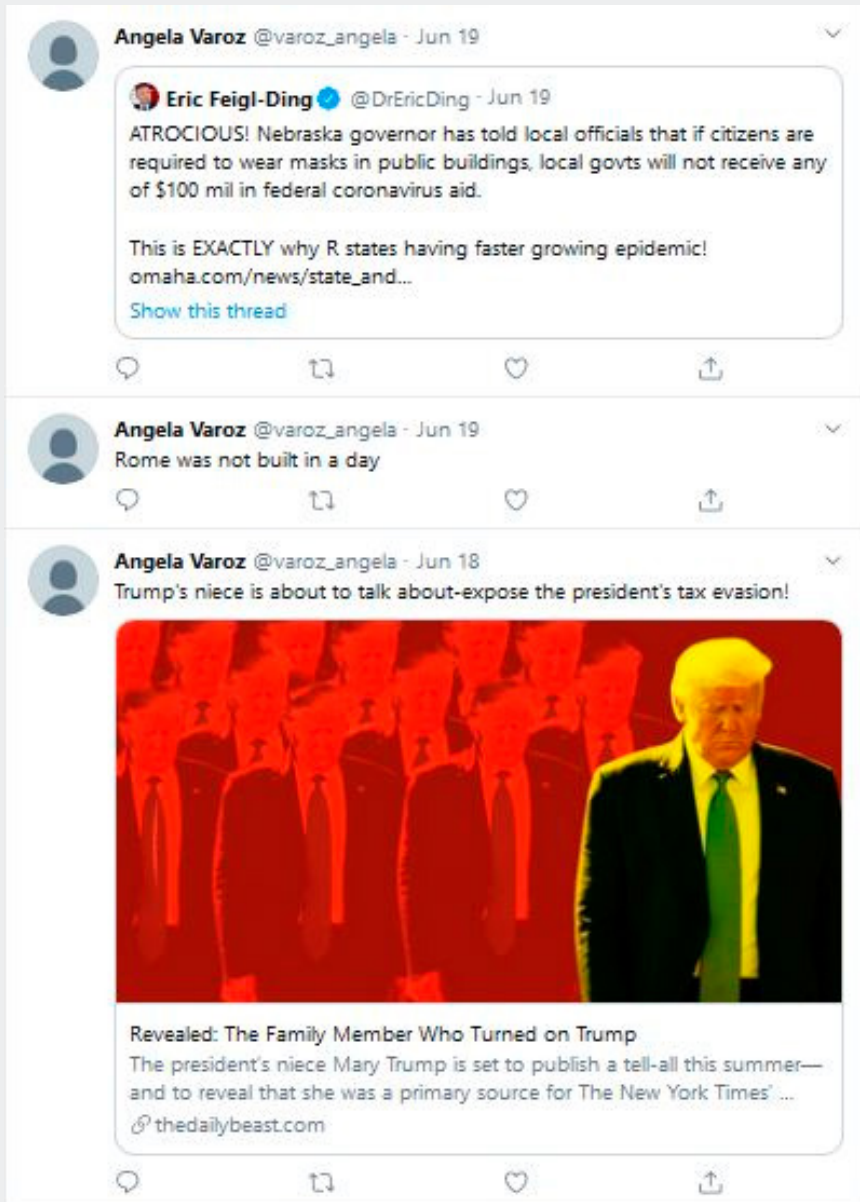
Jun 19 · 🌐 · Revenge the family civil war with presidential privileges?! This is Trump, the current president of the United States![https://twitter.com/AshaRangappa\\_/status/1272337474547826694](https://twitter.com/AshaRangappa_/status/1272337474547826694)



**Christine Griffin**

Jun 18 · 🌐 · Revenge the family civil war with presidential privileges?! This is Trump, the current president of the United States![https://twitter.com/AshaRangappa\\_/status/1272337474547826694](https://twitter.com/AshaRangappa_/status/1272337474547826694)

Figure 17: Twitter account sharing legitimate content critical of Trump and Republican states' handling of the Covid-19 crisis, captured 30 June 2020 (this account was deleted by Twitter shortly after).



There's no clear indication of a partisan lean, however: Trump appears to be being criticised in his capacity as a leader of the US rather than as a presidential candidate. At times, a small subset of accounts have amplified both Democrats and Republicans, and also boosted legitimate media coverage critical of the US electoral system, implying that the goal may be about deepening division and polarisation rather than an effort to promote any particular political actor (figures 18 and 19).

Figure 18: Twitter account retweeting both President Trump and Speaker Nancy Pelosi consecutively, captured 30 June 2020

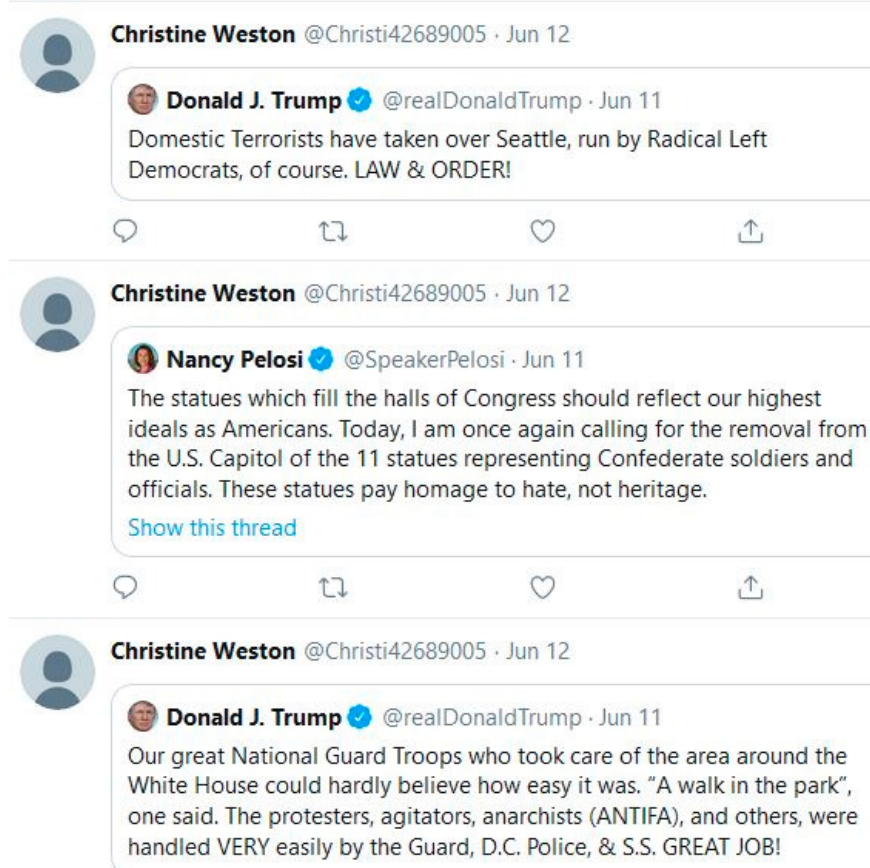


Figure 19: A *Now This* tweet about the electoral college, shared alongside two separate versions of text critical of the US electoral system, captured 20 July 2020



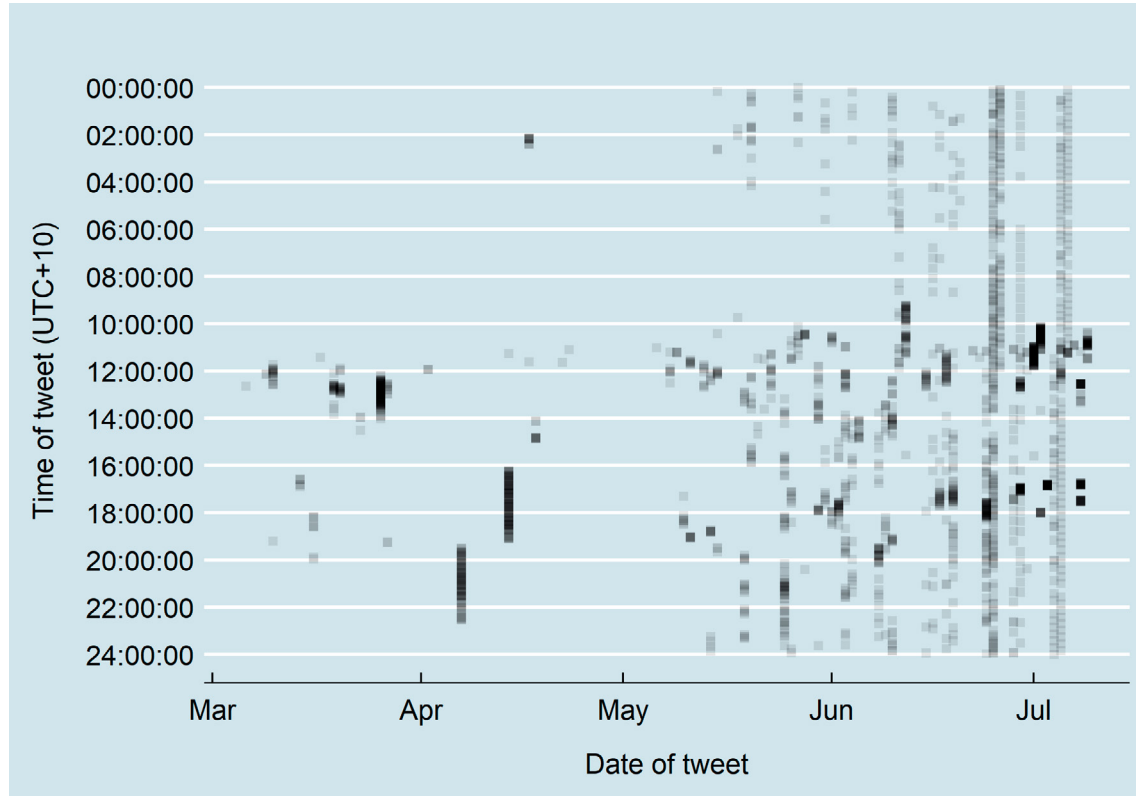
## Activity analysis

A large proportion of the Twitter accounts previously active in this campaign have been removed by Twitter, and the majority were detected automatically by the platform's spam prevention algorithms. Due to accounts being quickly deleted in this network, we analysed only a sample of 78 active accounts and 2,240 tweets captured on Twitter. Of those tweets, 99% received fewer than two likes, replies and retweets.

To determine whether accounts in this activity were controlled automatically or by human operators, we analysed patterns in the tweet times (Figure 20). In our sample, tweets didn't peak during any particular period of the day (for example, business hours) but, as the graph shows, on certain days tweets were posted periodically and consistently throughout the entire day, suggesting automation and coordination.



Figure 20: Plot of daily campaign tweet dates and tweet times during the day



Over 5 and 6 July 2020, these accounts were tweeting every 17 minutes and cycling through a short list of 21 common tweets, exhibiting highly automated behaviour.

The data suggests that the operator (there may be more than one) first collates an ordered list of tweets to be posted. Then, for each tweet on the list, an account is randomly selected from a pool of accounts (in their control) and scheduled to post that tweet. This repeats every 17 minutes until all items in the list are exhausted before returning to the start of the list and continuing.

This strategy creates the effect of individual accounts randomly posting at different times during the day, with the aim of circumventing Twitter's spam prevention systems. Given the accounts' attempts to appear authentic, a clear pattern of automated behaviour emerges only when posts from all accounts in this dataset are analysed.

Figure 21 displays the coordinated posting of tweets from accounts in this activity, demonstrating their scheduling at regular intervals.

**Figure 21: Table of tweets displaying date of the tweet, time of the tweet, the account and the content of the tweet, coloured by epochs of the same 21 tweets**

6/07/2020	8:38:55	dominiqueteas12	The United States has hit an all-time record for new COVID-19 cases for the second day in a row, but Trump Say
6/07/2020	8:21:39	ericama73540803	Trump's failure to govern has led to a drop in his approval ratings. he turned his anger on the media! https://w
6/07/2020	8:04:40	josephavinne	Trump EVER does. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VG-zrxDFaLA ...
6/07/2020	7:30:39	mindiharmon12	I believe, "symbol of hate", this is what Trump intended. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VG-zrxDFaLA ...
6/07/2020	6:56:40	nancycarraway5	When Trump was asked about sex scandals, he drove reporters out of anger! https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=
6/07/2020	6:39:39	tiffany50502340	Trump said disinfectants can cure diseases!Are you kidding me<U+FF1F> https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=
6/07/2020	6:22:24	melinda57818877	AV actress on the show burst Trump's sex "I don't want to go to bed with him"! https://www.youtube.com/wa
6/07/2020	6:05:25	melissa22485409	Do you think there is discrimination in the United States? of course! https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iGDJ
6/07/2020	5:48:24	meganle30515138	Black people are never slaves!Stand up your high head! https://twitter.com/nowthisnews/status/1270524330
6/07/2020	5:14:25	laurada74473301	Black people who died under racial discrimination are not in the minority. https://twitter.com/nowthisnews/
6/07/2020	4:57:24	erinbro50854306	Team Trump Pushes CDC to Dial Down Its Death Counts https://www.thedailybeast.com/team-trump-pushes
6/07/2020	4:40:24	shannon39051737	Need a Coronavirus Test? Being Rich and Famous May Help https://www.nytimes.com/2020/03/18/us/corona
6/07/2020	4:23:24	meinholzkateri	Sadly the cops have decided this community event that has gone on for weeks is no longer allowed and have t
6/07/2020	4:06:10	amylars15796495	We're in a worse place than we were early on! https://on.msnbc.com/2YqyUYc
6/07/2020	3:49:09	eileent69257831	The Trump administration's repatriation of a large number of illegal immigrants is a very cruel and inhuman pr
6/07/2020	3:32:09	bonniem20604319	The cold-blooded Trump decided to export the virus to poor countries that were unable to cope with the epid
6/07/2020	3:15:09	reginaw18103811	https://p.dw.com/p/3c2E1?maca=zh-Twitter-sharing ... <U+62DC><U+767B><U+53D7><U+5230><U+6027><U+4FI
6/07/2020	2:58:09	katheri04786426	All systems can be flawed if the actors are not perfect. Democracy is being destroyed by imperfect participant
6/07/2020	2:41:09	patrici89296231	'Janky System' is a stupid, failed system! https://twitter.com/nowthisnews/status/1278962431411187712 ...
6/07/2020	2:24:09	amykemp65504736	The United States has hit an all-time record for new COVID-19 cases for the second day in a row, but Trump Say
6/07/2020	2:06:54	kimberl85364998	Trump's failure to govern has led to a drop in his approval ratings. he turned his anger on the media! https://w
6/07/2020	1:49:55	amyvang61887951	Trump EVER does. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VG-zrxDFaLA ...
6/07/2020	1:32:58	nicolej74086336	"He has never lied to the American people." ... that's literally the only thing
6/07/2020	1:15:54	latrice43379603	I believe, "symbol of hate", this is what Trump intended. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VG-zrxDFaLA ...
6/07/2020	0:58:55	aliciat42315753	Donald Trump has a hiring problem — his "best people" promise didn't pan out! He is only a dishonest busin
6/07/2020	0:41:54	marcihossain	When Trump was asked about sex scandals, he drove reporters out of anger! https://www.youtube.com/watch
6/07/2020	0:24:54	ashleyt30625030	Trump said disinfectants can cure diseases!Are you kidding me<U+FF1F> https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=
6/07/2020	0:07:57	pinskyeufemia	AV actress on the show burst Trump's sex "I don't want to go to bed with him"! https://www.youtube.com/wa
5/07/2020	23:50:40	cindybr19326312	Do you think there is discrimination in the United States? of course! https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iGDJ
5/07/2020	23:33:39	meganpalacios9	Black people are never slaves!Stand up your high head! https://twitter.com/nowthisnews/status/1270524330
5/07/2020	23:16:39	nikkination5	Yes, the United States is your white country. it is the country that you whites built after the slaughter of Indiar
5/07/2020	22:59:39	josephavinne	Black people who died under racial discrimination are not in the minority. https://twitter.com/nowthisnews/
5/07/2020	22:42:39	meganpeoples15	Team Trump Pushes CDC to Dial Down Its Death Counts https://www.thedailybeast.com/team-trump-pushes
5/07/2020	22:25:40	hannahm17494121	Need a Coronavirus Test? Being Rich and Famous May Help https://www.nytimes.com/2020/03/18/us/corona
5/07/2020	22:08:39	mariojo34444778	Sadly the cops have decided this community event that has gone on for weeks is no longer allowed and have t
5/07/2020	21:51:24	cynthia05141642	We're in a worse place than we were early on! https://on.msnbc.com/2YqyUYc
5/07/2020	21:34:25	melissa22485409	The Trump administration's repatriation of a large number of illegal immigrants is a very cruel and inhuman pr
5/07/2020	21:00:25	bethany63748515	https://p.dw.com/p/3c2E1?maca=zh-Twitter-sharing ... <U+62DC><U+767B><U+53D7><U+5230><U+6027><U+4FI
5/07/2020	20:43:25	laurada74473301	All systems can be flawed if the actors are not perfect. Democracy is being destroyed by imperfect participant
5/07/2020	20:26:24	alyssas73094824	'Janky System' is a stupid, failed system! https://twitter.com/nowthisnews/status/1278962431411187712 ...
5/07/2020	20:09:25	amandar72243009	The United States has hit an all-time record for new COVID-19 cases for the second day in a row, but Trump Say
5/07/2020	19:52:25	juliavillaflor3	Trump's failure to govern has led to a drop in his approval ratings. he turned his anger on the media! https://w

Since our sample of tweets represents an incomplete picture of the activity, this automated activity is likely to have begun back in February 2020. Data gaps are due to unobservable tweets from suspended accounts.

On both Facebook and Twitter, many of the accounts (although not all) have replied to a particular post and tweet, respectively, with phrases such as 'Sow nothing, reap nothing' and 'Rome was not built in a day.' These and other phrases used by the accounts are commonly included in lists of English idioms for Chinese English-language learners.

An interesting point to note on both platforms is that, even when the text itself is in English, spacing around the punctuation marks sometimes suggests the use of a double-byte font, Pinyin input used for Asian languages (including Chinese), or both (Figure 22).

Figure 22: Facebook replies and tweet replies showing spacing around punctuation marks, captured 7 July 2020

The image displays two side-by-side screenshots of social media replies. The left screenshot shows Facebook replies to a post by '赵金林' (Zhao Jinlin) dated March 30. The post text is 'ggdgd'. Below the post, there are buttons for 'Like', 'Comment', and 'Share'. A list of replies is shown, with the first five visible. Each reply includes the user's profile picture, name, and the text of the reply. The replies are: 'Princesita Love' (Sow nothing, reap nothing), 'Jasmine Campbell' (Learn to walk before you run), 'Kelly Embree' (Rome was not built in a day), 'Elizabeth Nelson' (Learn to walk before you run), and 'Elizabeth Nelson' (Rome was not built in a day). The right screenshot shows Twitter replies to a tweet by '@6v931hDohqmw9qC' dated April 15, 2019. The tweet text is '我希望有一个人可以看穿我的逞强, 保护我的脆弱' (I hope there is someone who can see through my stubbornness, protect my weakness). Below the tweet, there are buttons for 'Like', 'Retweet', and 'Reply'. A list of replies is shown, with the first four visible. Each reply includes the user's profile picture, name, and the text of the reply. The replies are: 'Andrea Smith' (Replying to @6v931hDohqmw9qC, Hope for the best, prepare for the worst), 'Sonia Mason' (Replying to @6v931hDohqmw9qC, Rome was not built in a day), and 'Patricia Smith' (Replying to @6v931hDohqmw9qC, Sow nothing, reap nothing).

**Facebook Replies:**

- 赵金林** March 30 · 17 161 Comments 170 Shares
- Like** **Comment** **Share**
- View previous comments** 50 of 161
- Princesita Love** Sow nothing, reap nothing  
Like · Reply · 4w
- Jasmine Campbell** Learn to walk before you run  
Like · Reply · 4w
- Kelly Embree** Rome was not built in a day  
Like · Reply · 3w
- Elizabeth Nelson** Learn to walk before you run  
Like · Reply · 3w
- Elizabeth Nelson** Rome was not built in a day

**Twitter Replies:**

- 流年惊殇** @6v931hDohqmw9qC  
我希望有一个人可以看穿我的逞强, 保护我的脆弱  
Translate Tweet  
1:03 PM · Apr 15, 2019 · Twitter Web Client
- 8 Likes**
- Andrea Smith** @AndreaS08633419 · Mar 19  
Replying to @6v931hDohqmw9qC  
Hope for the best, prepare for the worst
- Sonia Mason** @SoniaMa53630920 · May 6  
Replying to @6v931hDohqmw9qC  
Rome was not built in a day
- Patricia Smith** @Patrici89296231 · May 9  
Replying to @6v931hDohqmw9qC  
Sow nothing, reap nothing

On Twitter, the relevant tweet was made on 25 April 2019. The account used was created in January 2018 and had previously been used only for tweeting a handful of Chinese-language phrases and retweeting Chinese state media (Figure 23).

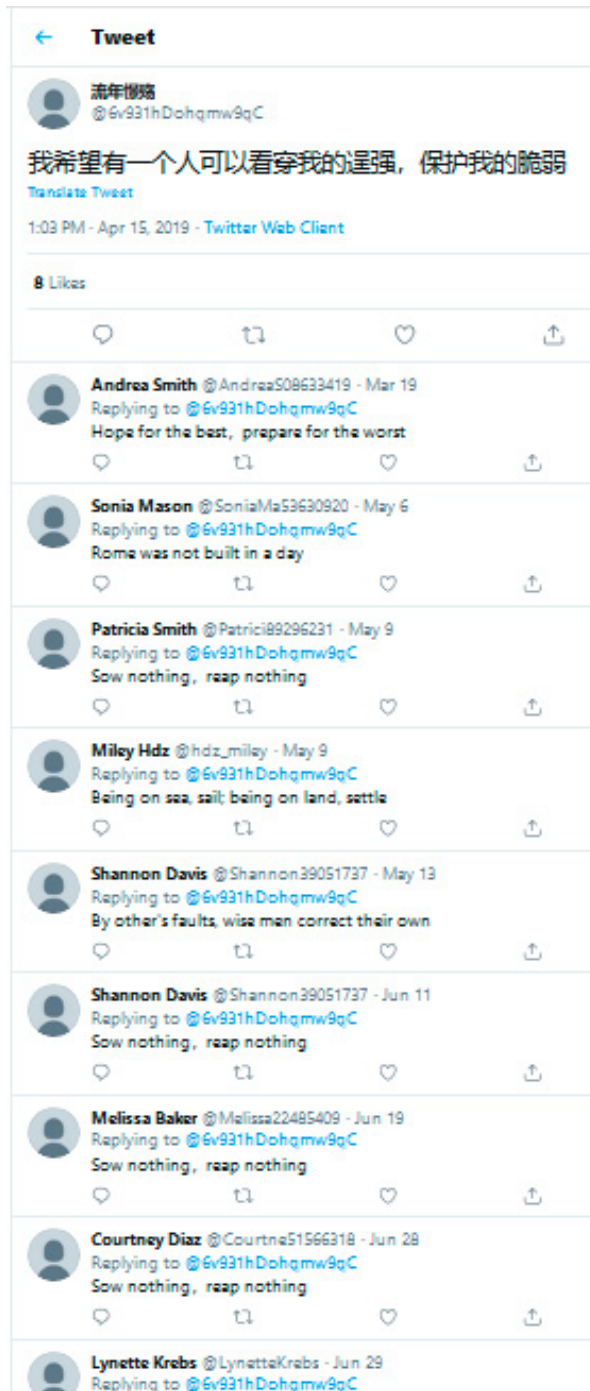
Figure 23: Twitter account @6v931hDohqmw9qC, captured 7 July 2020



From 19 March 2020 to 15 July 2020, the tweet received 538 replies. The replies took place over the course of several months. Some accounts replied more than once (Figure 24).



Figure 24: Replies to anchor tweet, captured 7 July 2020



Twitter has already suspended most of the accounts replying to this tweet. A sample of 42 visible replies was posted by 25 active accounts. This scales to an estimated 316 unique accounts replying to the tweet in total. However, the actual number of accounts is more likely to be between 200 and 300, since accounts that post more frequently are more likely to be suspended.

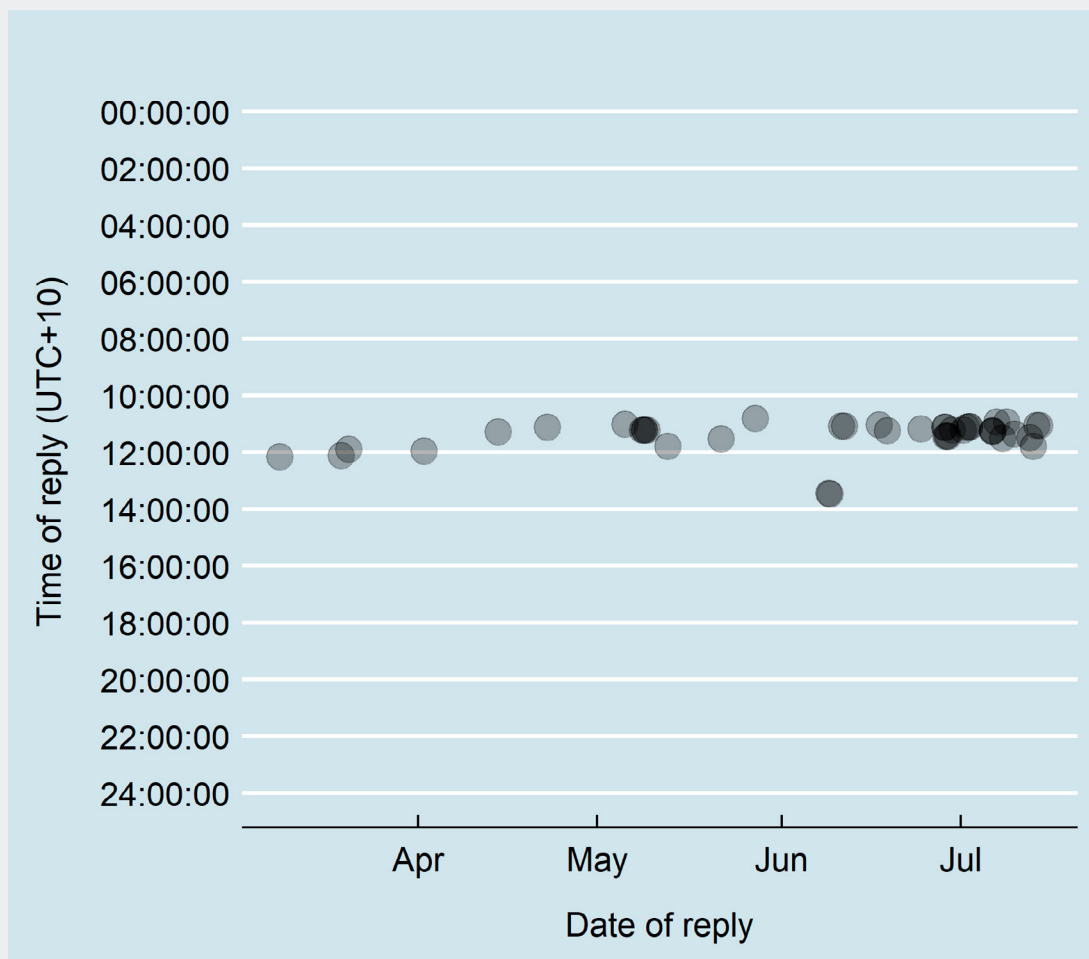
Each day, a batch of three or six accounts replied to the anchoring tweet between 10:30 am and 12:00 pm (AEST, UTC+10), showing a high level of automation or discipline. Replies on the same day would be posted within minutes of each other (Table 1 and Figure 25).

Table 1: Replies to anchor tweet on 15 July 2020

Time	Account	Replying tweet
11:43:10	veronic50148375	Learn to walk before you run
11:43:34	lorystahl2	Learn to walk before you run
11:43:49	lesliem56101513	Rome was not built in a day
11:44:13	shirley13665164	Rome was not built in a day <sup>a</sup>
11:44:37	kristinarichie4	Sow nothing, reap nothing <sup>a</sup>
11:44:51	jenport54713978	Sow nothing, reap nothing <sup>a</sup>

a Replies immediately detected and hidden by Twitter.

Figure 25: Plot showing the times of posts by a sample of accounts replying to the anchor tweet between 9 March and 14 July 2020



Within this dataset, the posting patterns across platforms suggest coordination. Similarly on Facebook, a post made on 30 March 2020 received 182 comments and 171 shares between 24 April and 7 July; at the time of writing, the most recent was one minute before the most recent tweet reply. The content of the replies and shares consists of the same small set of repeated phrases, as seen on Twitter and posted between 10:30 am and 12:00 pm (AEST, UTC+10) (figures 26 and 27). These accounts also post in groups of three each day.

Figure 26: Facebook post, captured 7 July 2020



赵金林

March 30 · 🌐

ggdgd

 17

161 Comments 170 Shares

 Like

 Comment

 Share



Chloe Jones Sow nothing, reap nothing

Like · Reply · 10w



Lindsay Ramirez Rome was not built in a day ...

Like · Reply · 10w



Lana Diaz Rome was not built in a day

Like · Reply · 10w



Cara Wood Rome was not built in a day

Like · Reply · 9w



Lindsay Ramirez Learn to walk before you run

Like · Reply · 9w



Alicia Moore Sow nothing, reap nothing

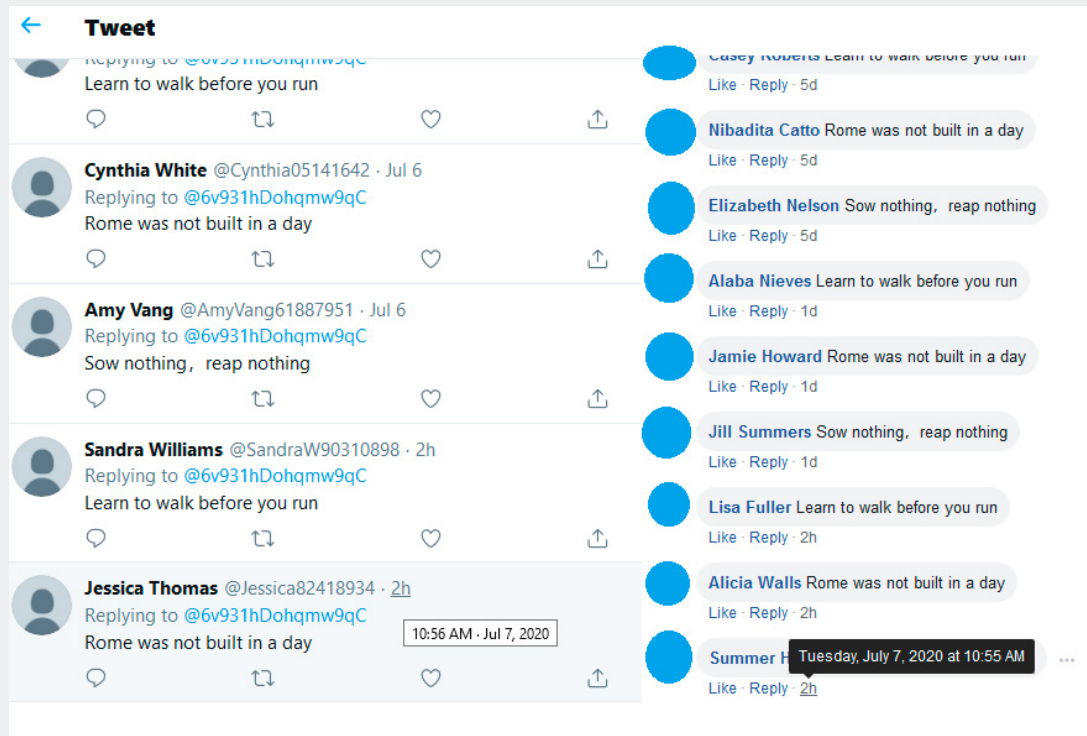
Like · Reply · 9w



Angela Russell By other's faults, wise men correct their own

Note: Profile pictures have been obscured, as they may have been taken from private individuals and used by the campaign operators without permission.

Figure 27: Timing of Facebook and Twitter replies, captured 7 July 2020



The Facebook account used for this post was first active on 15 October 2019 and appears to have been used as a test account. Its posts are gibberish or platitudes, as are many of the replies to earlier posts, which also appear to belong to test accounts (Figure 28).



Figure 28: Earlier Facebook posts, captured 7 July 2020



It isn't immediately clear why the accounts do this. The fact that many accounts have replied multiple times to the anchor tweet or post over a period of weeks or months seems to weigh against it being simply a test of whether the account is working.

Perhaps more likely, it may be an attempt to establish a pattern of seemingly legitimate activity in order to prevent the account being detected by the platforms' anti-spam systems. Notably, the same or similar phrases are used by other accounts, which also pose as women (some professional spammers recommend creating female inauthentic accounts because it's easier to persuade real users to follow or friend them), and are used in various spam or porn commercial operations (Figure 29).

Figure 29: Accounts used in spam operation, captured 14 July 2020



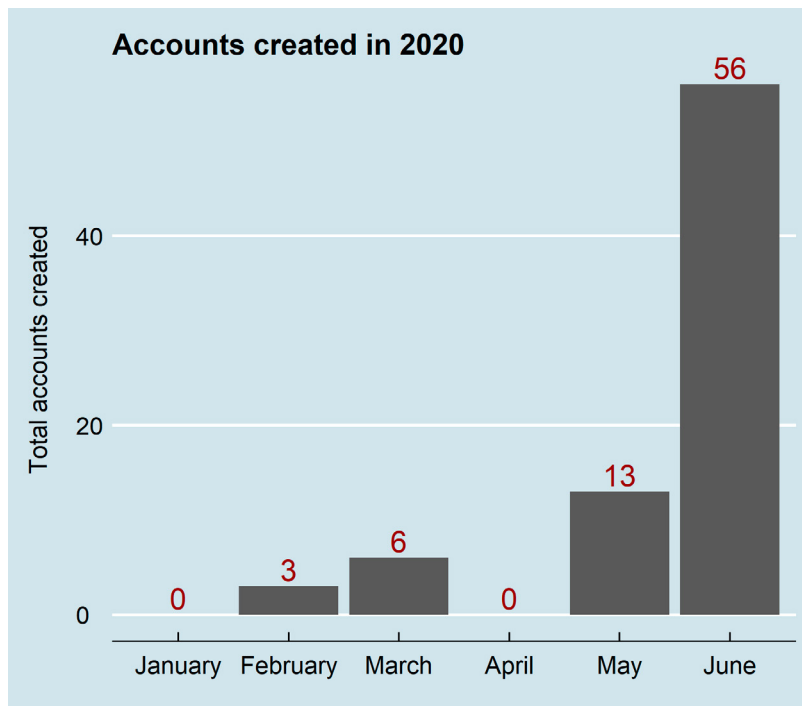
## Accounts

In addition to the identical content of their replies, the accounts show a number of other consistent features. On Twitter, this includes the lack of profile pictures, the lack of profile descriptions and the use of women's names using the Latin alphabet (as opposed to, for example, Chinese characters). Almost all accounts use a handle generated automatically by Twitter when no custom handle is given, such as @ViryFranco2 or @KimWest90464133.

The accounts appear to be either created or purchased from a commercial vendor specifically for this campaign, unlike in some previous campaigns, which have made significant use of older or repurposed accounts.

In our sample, accounts were progressively created from February 2020 onwards, and 72% of our sampled accounts were created in June (Figure 30). This is skewed by the fact that older accounts were suspended by Twitter before we were able to detect them.

Figure 30: Account creation dates

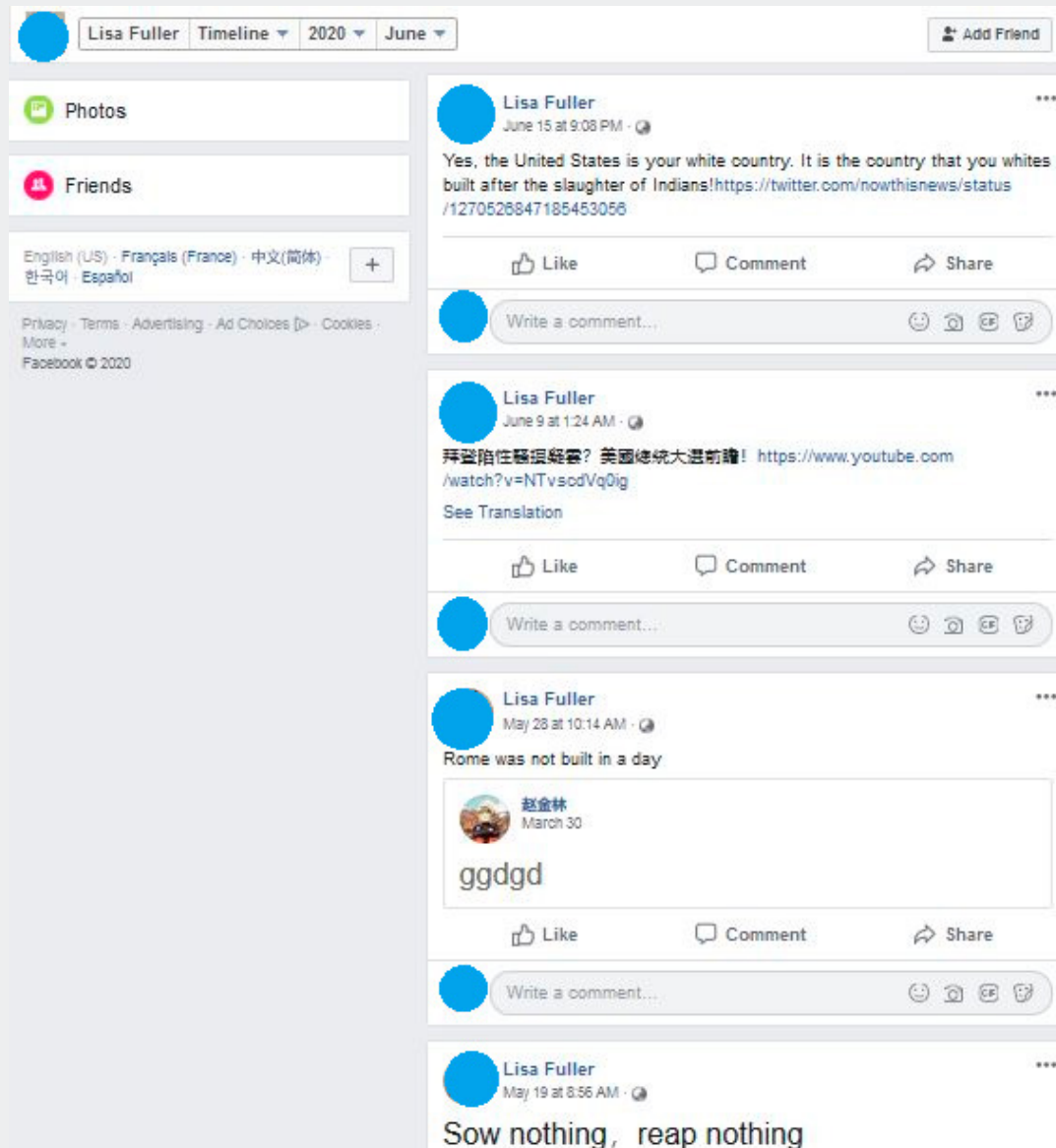


A small number have previously shared Chinese state media articles or tweeted in Chinese; those accounts tend to be the older accounts in the dataset, and their relatively small number may be due to the fact that many other older accounts involved in earlier activity have been deleted (although they can still be found using Google cache).

Some also appear to have been used in an earlier campaign targeting the Falun Gong / Falun Dafa community in the US, particularly the [Shen Yun Performing Arts Troupe](#) and the [Falun Gong compound in New York](#). Across our sample of accounts, the most shared URL (63 times) is of an [article](#) by Hongzhi Li used as a reference to claim that the US supports the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) or that people infected by Covid-19 in the US are now members of the CCP.

The Facebook accounts also all use women's names. No real effort has been made to develop convincing personas for the accounts. Unlike on Twitter, however, most do have profile pictures. The pictures appear likely to be personal photographs taken from the social media profiles of unrelated individuals, possibly without their knowledge or consent (those images have been obscured in this report to protect the privacy of the individuals). Most seem to have first become active on 12 and 15 April 2020, and at least 30 accounts changed their profile pictures on those two days. Eight other accounts also became active on 20 April 2020 (Figure 31).

Figure 31: Timeline of a Facebook account involved in the activity, captured 30 June 2020



While there's been no real building of personas, the accounts have periodically attempted to represent themselves as American through the use of 'we', 'us' and 'our' in relation to, for example, the US Government's response to the Covid-19 crisis (figures 32, 33 and 34).



Figure 32: Facebook post, captured 13 July 2020

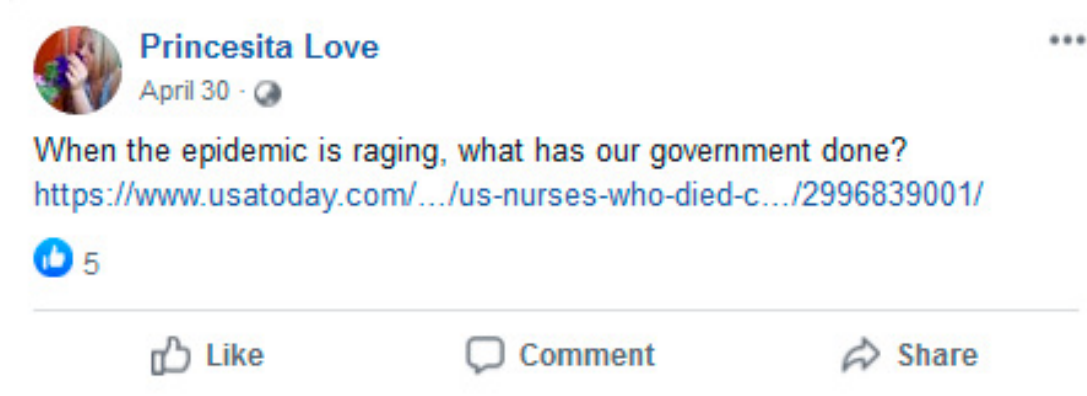


Figure 33: Tweet, captured 13 July 2020



Figure 34: Tweet, captured 14th July 2020



## Conclusion

This investigation highlights the evolving tactics that actors use to manipulate social media audiences, including networks of fake accounts, cross-platform activity, automated and coordinated posting patterns, the selective seeding of legitimate content to drive engagement and influence, and divisive content themes designed to provoke emotive responses and propagate negative sentiment.

The campaign's content themes echo elements of the [overt messaging](#) and [covert disinformation](#) emerging from the diplomatic and propaganda apparatus of the PRC. Linguistic traits within the dataset suggest that content was being translated from Chinese to English by operators behind the activity. [Previous research from ASPI](#) has demonstrated that there's a spectrum of pro-PRC attempts to manipulate political discourse on social media. While this campaign hasn't been attributed to a specific actor, it's likely that there will be ongoing strands of cross-platform influence activity designed to shape perceptions as the US approaches its presidential election in November 2020.

The type of small-scale campaign described in this investigation can be seen as complementing and supporting PRC propaganda and disinformation directed at targets of the party-state, whether governments, companies or even individuals. Understanding the techniques and practices used in these campaigns can help in identifying when they are occurring.

## Notes

- 1 The exact number is difficult to estimate due to the rapid rate at which Twitter accounts are being deleted. Those accounts are likely to have been removed by Twitter because they displayed a high level of automated behaviour and therefore have been detected as spam.

## Acronyms and abbreviations

CCP	Chinese Communist Party
ICPC	International Cyber Policy Centre
PRC	People's Republic of China

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