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 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
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.
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).
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).
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).
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).
Automating influence on Covid-19

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

Tweet

Secretary Pompeo @SecPompeo · Jun 11
The very existence of the International Religious Freedom Report is evidence of our resolve to defend human dignity. No other nation gathers such an enormous and comprehensive accounting of this fundamental human right.

Laura Daniels @LauraDa74473301
Replying to @SecPompeo
The overflow of freedom has created the situation today. The prerequisite of freedom is to live.
7:27 PM · Jun 19, 2020 · Twitter Web App

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

Donald J. Trump @realDonaldTrump · Jun 3
NYC. CALL UP THE NATIONAL GUARD. The lowlifes and losers are ripping you apart. Act fast! Don't make the same horrible and deadly mistake you made with the Nursing Homes!!!
31.3K 69.4K 253.8K

Sonia Mason @SoniaMa53030920
Replying to @realDonaldTrump
The overflow of freedom has created the situation today. The prerequisite of freedom is to live.
9:56 PM · Jun 3, 2020 · Twitter Web App
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
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

Christine Weston @Christi42689005 · Jun 12

Donald J. Trump @realDonaldTrump · Jun 11
Domestic Terrorists have taken over Seattle, run by Radical Left Democrats, of course. LAW & ORDER!

Christine Weston @Christi42689005 · Jun 12

Nancy Pelosi @SpeakerPelosi · Jun 11
The statues which fill the halls of Congress should reflect our highest ideals as Americans. Today, I am once again calling for the removal from the U.S. Capitol of the 11 statues representing Confederate soldiers and officials. These statues pay homage to hate, not heritage.
Show this thread

Christine Weston @Christi42689005 · Jun 12

Donald J. Trump @realDonaldTrump · Jun 11
Our great National Guard Troops who took care of the area around the White House could hardly believe how easy it was. "A walk in the park", one said. The protesters, agitators, anarchists (ANTIFA), and others, were handled VERY easily by the Guard, D.C. Police, & S.S. GREAT JOB!
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.
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 21 tweets

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Username</th>
<th>Content</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>6/7/2020</td>
<td>dominiqueabaeu2</td>
<td>The United States has hit an all-time record for new COVID-19 cases for the second day in a row, but Trump Sr. has failed to respond to a drop in his approval ratings.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6/7/2020</td>
<td>josephavinas</td>
<td>Team Trump pushes CDC to dial down its death counts.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6/7/2020</td>
<td>mindharmon12</td>
<td>I believe, &quot;symbol of hate,&quot; is what Trump intended.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6/6/2020</td>
<td>nanacaraway5</td>
<td>When Trump was asked about sex scandals, he drew reporters out of anger!</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6/5/2020</td>
<td>stefan202340</td>
<td>Trump said disinfectants can cure diseases. Are you kidding me?!</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6/2/2020</td>
<td>melinda5783887</td>
<td>AV actress on the show busts Trump’s sex “I don’t want to go to bed with him!”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6/1/2020</td>
<td>melloiss2248509</td>
<td>Do you think there is discrimination in the United States? Of course!</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5/8/2020</td>
<td>magalen2851513</td>
<td>Black people are never slaves! Stand up on your head!</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5/4/2020</td>
<td>erininiz5851406</td>
<td>Team Trump pushes CDC to dial down its death counts.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4/2/2020</td>
<td>marchoh8tene1</td>
<td>The United States has hit an all-time record for new COVID-19 cases for the second day in a row, but Trump Sr. has failed to respond to a drop in his approval ratings.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4/1/2020</td>
<td>ameryl3579645</td>
<td>We’re in a worse place than we were early on!</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3/4/2020</td>
<td>thielemti9257831</td>
<td>The Trump administration’s repatriation of a large number of illegal immigrants is a very cruel and inhumane practice.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3/1/2020</td>
<td>bonnem12004319</td>
<td>The cold-blooded Trump decided to export the virus to poor countries that were unable to cope with the epic pandemic.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3/1/2020</td>
<td>reginaw12301981</td>
<td>Trump's victory is going to be a drop in his approval ratings.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2/28/2020</td>
<td>katherin6476926</td>
<td>All systems can be flawed if the actors are not perfect. Democracy is being destroyed by imperfect participant.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2/1/2020</td>
<td>patriots219826721</td>
<td>‘Janky System’ is a stupid, failed system!</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2/4/2020</td>
<td>amylemp756004738</td>
<td>The United States has hit an all-time record for new COVID-19 cases for the second day in a row, but Trump Sr. has failed to respond to a drop in his approval ratings.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2/4/2020</td>
<td>kimbr6836498</td>
<td>Trump’s victory is going to be a drop in his approval ratings.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1/4/2020</td>
<td>amylemp756004738</td>
<td>Team Trump pushes CDC to dial down its death counts.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1/3/2020</td>
<td>ricordog86533</td>
<td>He has never lied to the American people. — that’s literally the only thing.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1/3/2020</td>
<td>aliczeg34335753</td>
<td>Donald Trump has a hiring problem — his “best people” promise didn’t pan out!</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1/4/2020</td>
<td>marchossain</td>
<td>When Trump was asked about sex scandals, he drew reporters out of anger!</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1/2/2020</td>
<td>ashleyt6025930</td>
<td>Trump said disinfectants can cure diseases. Are you kidding me?!</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1/2/2020</td>
<td>pickledna1110373</td>
<td>The Trump administration’s repatriation of a large number of illegal immigrants is a very cruel and inhumane practice.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1/2/2020</td>
<td>indybr5136212</td>
<td>Do you think there is discrimination in the United States? Of course!</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1/2/2020</td>
<td>meganapela109</td>
<td>Black people are never slaves! Stand up on your head!</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1/2/2020</td>
<td>rick67003240</td>
<td>Team Trump pushes CDC to dial down its death counts.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1/2/2020</td>
<td>meganpoppele15</td>
<td>Team Trump pushes CDC to dial down its death counts.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1/2/2020</td>
<td>hannahmm7484122</td>
<td>Need a Coronavirus Test? I’m Rich and Famous May Help.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1/2/2020</td>
<td>marijsp3444778</td>
<td>Sadly the cops have decided this community event that has gone on for weeks is no longer allowed and have</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1/2/2020</td>
<td>cynthi60149164</td>
<td>We’re in a worse place than we were early on!</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1/2/2020</td>
<td>cynthia60149164</td>
<td>We’re in a worse place than we were early on!</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1/2/2020</td>
<td>melissad2248509</td>
<td>The Trump administration’s repatriation of a large number of illegal immigrants is a very cruel and inhumane practice.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1/2/2020</td>
<td>bethany6745855</td>
<td>All systems can be flawed if the actors are not perfect. Democracy is being destroyed by imperfect participant.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1/2/2020</td>
<td>laurane7447301</td>
<td>All systems can be flawed if the actors are not perfect. Democracy is being destroyed by imperfect participant.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1/2/2020</td>
<td>andaman27248309</td>
<td>The United States has hit an all-time record for new COVID-19 cases for the second day in a row, but Trump Sr. has failed to respond to a drop in his approval ratings.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1/2/2020</td>
<td>julialevant803</td>
<td>Trump’s victory is going to be a drop in his approval ratings.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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

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).
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).
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

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Time</th>
<th>Account</th>
<th>Replying tweet</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>11:43:10</td>
<td>veronic50148375</td>
<td>Learn to walk before you run</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11:43:34</td>
<td>lorystahl2</td>
<td>Learn to walk before you run</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11:43:49</td>
<td>lesliem56101513</td>
<td>Rome was not built in a day</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11:44:13</td>
<td>shirley13665164</td>
<td>Rome was not built in a day</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11:44:37</td>
<td>kristinarchie4</td>
<td>Sow nothing, reap nothing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11:44:51</td>
<td>jenport54713978</td>
<td>Sow nothing, reap nothing</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*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

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

Princesita Love
April 30 ·

When the epidemic is raging, what has our government done?
https://www.usatoday.com/.../us-nurses-who-died-c.../2996839001/

Like
Comment
Share

5

Figure 33: Tweet, captured 13 July 2020

Miley Hdz @hdz_miley · Jun 8
The good news is that our military, as always, refuses to participate in politics. But this is bad news for Trump.

The Atlantic
James Mattis Denounces President Trump, Describes Him as a Threat to the Constitution

Military leaders become increasingly vocal against Trump
From retired Adm. Mike Mullen’s Atlantic column to former Defense Secretary Jim Mattis accusing the president of trying to divide America, ... ⬅️ msnbc.com
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
About the author
Elise Thomas is a researcher working with the International Cyber Policy Centre.
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What is ASPI?
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