Covid-19
Disinformation
and social media manipulation

ASPI AUSTRALIAN STRATEGIC POLICY INSTITUTE

INTERNATIONAL CYBER POLICY CENTRE

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Viral videos: Covid-19, China and inauthentic influence on Facebook

Introduction

For the latest report in our series on Covid-19 disinformation, we've investigated ongoing inauthentic activity on Facebook and, to a lesser extent, YouTube. This activity uses both English- and Chinese -language content to present narratives that support the political objectives of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP).

These narratives span a range of topics, including assertions of corruption and incompetence in the Trump administration, the US Government's decision to ban TikTok, the George Floyd and Black Lives Matter protests, and the ongoing tensions in the US–China relationship. A major theme, and the focus of this report, is criticism of how the US broadly, and the Trump administration in particular, are handling the Covid-19 crisis on both the domestic and the global levels.

This investigation has links to the activity covered in our earlier report, *Retweeting through the Great Firewall*, and the activity set covered in Graphika's *Spamouflage goes to America* report. A recent report from the Institute for Strategic Dialogue and Alliance for Securing Democracy on pro-Chinese government activity on Twitter also noted the use of YouTube videos. As in previous iterations of this operation, organic engagement with this content continues to be extremely low. The persistence of these actors despite low engagement, and repeated discovery and deletions is in itself notable.

There has been no official attribution of this activity by Facebook. Since April Google's Threat Analysis Group has removed more than two thousand YouTube channels (186 channels in April, 1,098 in May, 1,312 in June, 299 in July) emerging from its investigations into coordinated influence operations linked to China. While ASPI is not making direct attribution in this report – given that Facebook has not publicly done so – it is notable that the cross-platform activity we analyse presents narratives that support the political objectives of the CCP and involve a significant investment in time and resources over a period of months, implying a well-resourced, persistent and patient actor.

It's worth noting that the very persistence of these assets should not in itself help them to evade scrutiny. The short attention span of the media, and to some extent the research and policy community, can be highly beneficial to malign actors because it disincentivises the investigation and exposure of ongoing operations. In other words, the perennial question of 'What's new about this?' allows malign actors who simply persist through the initial rounds of detection and removal to carry on their activities more or less uninterrupted.

Ongoing reporting and investigation into these operations is necessary to educate policymakers and the general public on the persistence and evolution of malign influence activity. For these reasons, it's important to track and document the tactics, techniques and procedures of persistent actors.

This report documents the actor's ongoing experimentation with bilingual video content (Figure 1) and automated translation to promote propaganda and disinformation, with a particular focus on disinformation related to Covid-19.

Figure 1: Screenshot of Facebook video, captured 31 August 2020
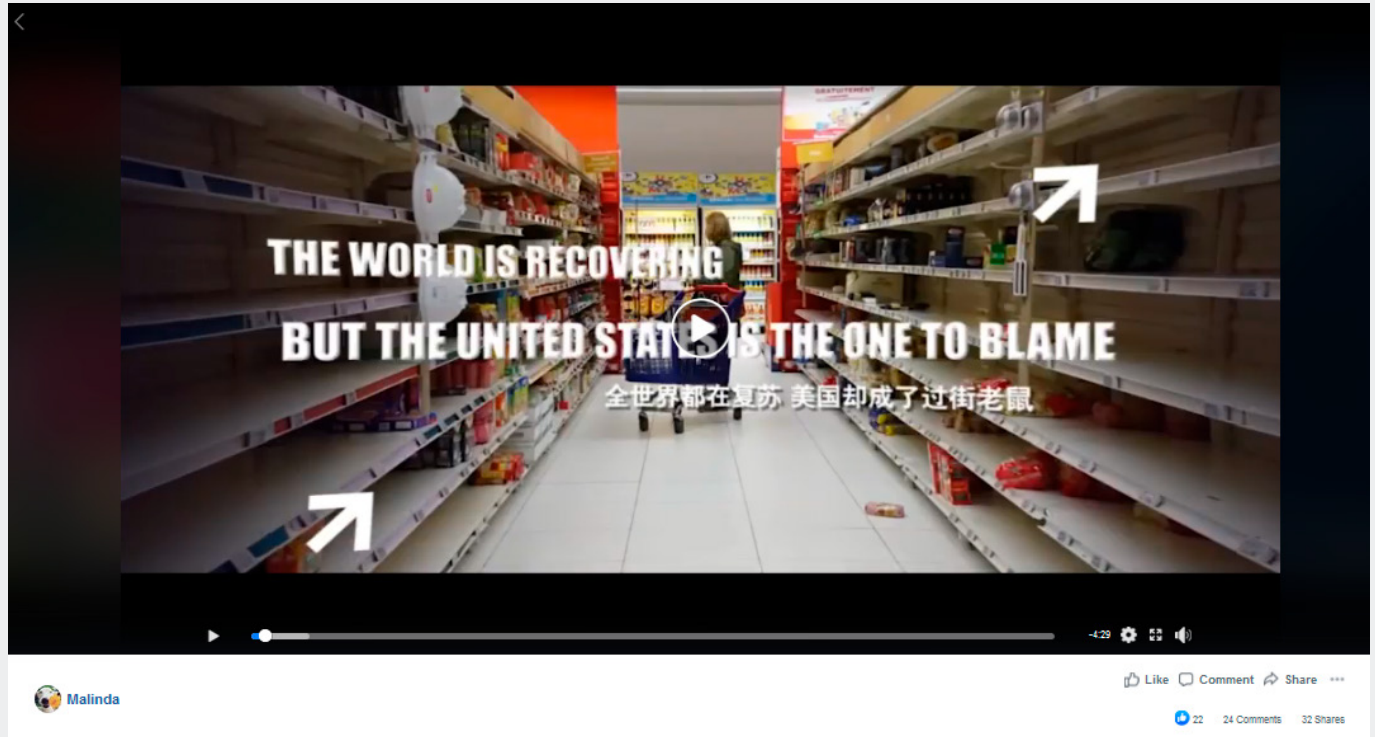
Accounts and infrastructure

A number of pages appear to have been created specifically to target the topic of Covid-19. Those pages have names such as 'Health First', 'Fight the epidemic' and 'Together to fight the epidemic'. The US's Covid-19 crisis is treated in this context as a consequence of the political failures of the US, and the pages share common content with other pages in the network, including content relating to political topics such as the US 2020 presidential election, protests and riots in the US, and the failings of the Trump administration. While this report makes no attribution, it's notable that this activity is in broad alignment with the state-actor intentions outlined in the assessment offered by William Evanina, Director of the National Counterintelligence and Security Center: that China is expanding its influence efforts ahead of the election and is increasingly critical of the current US administration's handling of the Covid-19 pandemic.

There's considerable diversity in the accounts and pages linked to this activity set on Facebook. Most of the accounts we discovered were created or became active in 2020. Some have been active since January or February this year, while others appeared only in September 2020 . This variation in creation dates probably reflects a high level of attrition over time, as accounts are detected and deleted and need to be replaced.

Some of the older accounts have previously engaged in activity targeting controversial Chinese billionaire Guo Wengui, who was also a target of the campaigns we investigated in our two reports, *Tweeting through the Great Firewall* and *Retweeting through the Great Firewall*. There's a degree of crossover between Facebook accounts that we identified independently during our work on *Retweeting through the Great Firewall*, which remain active on the platform, and the accounts considered in this activity set.

The actors behind information operations play an adversarial game with the social media platforms, evolving their tactics to find new vulnerabilities. Over time, operators may also change how they acquire new accounts (for example, by purchasing accounts from a different supplier) or experimenting with new types of assets, such as pivoting more to using Facebook pages rather than individual user accounts. Our previous analysis suggested that individual operators may be responsible for acquiring and maintaining their own account networks, and this individual variation is likely to add to the overall diversity of accounts involved.

As an example, the 33 accounts sharing a post from the Facebook page 'Together to fight the epidemic' on 24 August include a mix of Chinese-character and English-alphabet account names; profile pictures that use cartoon characters or stock images, including the same stock photo of a woman for two different accounts; and a six-day-old account the name of which appears to be just a keyboard smash of random characters (Figure 2).

Figure 2: Shares on post from 'Together to fight the epidemic' page, captured 31 August 2020

While some of the accounts use (and confuse) Western names, there's no evidence, in this campaign, of any effort to build convincing personas for the accounts (Figure 3).

Figure 3: A 'Malinda' account sharing posts with the same image and different Chinese-language text from the pages 'China will win' and 'Fight-the-epidemic', captured 31 August 2020

Individual accounts also blend content about the US's Covid-19 outbreak with other highly politicised content, for example by sharing videos about how the US's Covid-19 statistics can't be trusted and videos about the protests and ongoing unrest in Portland on the same day (Figure 4).

Figure 4: Posts by 'Lilly Anderson' on 27 August 2020, captured 31 August 2020

In some cases, politicised Covid-19-related content is interspersed with completely unrelated material. For example, one page is primarily about luxury car brands and has interspersed some of the Covid-19-related content before going back to posting about cars. Another page is doing the same with planes. This may reflect the workflow of a contractor with multiple clients.

The Facebook accounts and pages identified in this report also displayed highly coordinated and possibly automated behaviour to create inauthentic engagement. On 24 August, more than 30 unique accounts liked, commented on and shared the same five posts from the pages: 'Together to fight the epidemic', 'Fight-the-epidemic', 'Health First', 'Peaceful coexistence of the world' and 'China will win' (Figure 5).

Figure 5: 'Together to fight the epidemic' post, captured on 31 August

Translation: 'You wanted to use a trade war to destroy China's economy but failed! Then [you] attempted to use the American virus to destroy China, but who would have thought that the American virus is more suitable for breeding and spreading in the United States, the land of so-called "democracy and freedom"! In the end, like a desperate dog trying to jump over a wall, you resorted to blaming others—playing the trick of a thief crying "Stop thief!" Come on, bring out all your tricks. China will fight to the end!'

Those five pages initially posted content between 12:34 and 12:39 (AEST +10) on 24 August, which then allowed other accounts and pages to like, comment and share later in the day. Each post has received more than 80 likes, comments and shares. Looking at the time lines of accounts and pages engaging with these posts shows that all of these interactions are from the same group of appropriated or newly created accounts identified above, such as the 'Rtrhcolth Coag' account. Some accounts and pages had their privacy settings set to hide their friends and followers, but, of the accounts and pages that had their friends or followers visible, almost all had one or no connections—a potential marker of inauthenticity.

There are periods during which the sequence of page sharing is consistent with a single individual resharing pages in turn from several different Facebook accounts. For example, the account named 'Malinda' liked, commented and shared posts from these pages in the space of five minutes (Table 1). Other accounts and pages behaved in similar ways, usually sharing the last post within 10 minutes of their first share or comment. One account named '伟大的国度' (Translation: 'A great nation') shared and commented on five posts within a minute of the initial share.

Table 1: Activity time line for the 'Malinda' account, 24 August 2020

Time (AEST +10)	Activity
16:29	Shares 'Fight-the-epidemic' post (originally posted at 12:39)
16:30	Comments on 'Fight-the-epidemic' post
16:30	Shares 'China will win' post (originally posted 12:37)
16:30	Comments on 'China will win' post
16:31	Shares 'Together to fight the epidemic' post (originally posted 12:36)
16:31	Comments on 'Together to fight the epidemic' post
16:32	Shares 'Peaceful coexistence of the world' post (originally posted 12:35)
16:32	Comments on 'Peaceful coexistence of the world' post
16:33	Shares 'Health First' post (originally posted 12:34)
16:34	Comments on 'Health First' post

Note: The 'Malinda' account also liked each of these posts, but Facebook doesn't provide data on when posts were liked.

The initial pattern of sharing and commenting on posts starting at 15:37 (Table 2) suggests a single operator managing multiple accounts and amplifying the content posted earlier that day. At 16:52, the order of accounts becomes disjointed, which can possibly be explained by new operators starting their work and operating concurrently.

Table 2: Accounts sharing content from five pages on 24 August 2020

Time (AEST +10)	Account	Page Shared
15:37	永久的爱	Health First
15:38	永久的爱	Together to fight the epidemic
15:38	永久的爱	Peaceful coexistence of the world
15:38	永久的爱	China will win
15:39	永久的爱	Fight-the-epidemic
15:41	Cute	Health First
15:41	Cute	China will win
16:01	CooL	Health First
16:03	CooL	Peaceful coexistence of the world
16:05	CooL	Together to fight the epidemic
16:07	CooL	China will win
16:10	CooL	Fight-the-epidemic
16:20	Rtrhcolh Coag	Together to fight the epidemic
16:20	Rtrhcolh Coag	Health First
16:20	Rtrhcolh Coag	Peaceful coexistence of the world
16:20	Rtrhcolh Coag	China will win
16:21	Rtrhcolh Coag	Fight-the-epidemic
16:29	Malinda	Fight-the-epidemic
16:30	Malinda	China will win
16:31	Malinda	Together to fight the epidemic
16:32	Malinda	Peaceful coexistence of the world
16:33	Malinda	Health First
16:52	Minglo	Health First
16:52	Moling	Health First
16:52	Lilly Anderson	Health First
16:52	Minglo	Peaceful coexistence of the world
16:53	Moling	Together to fight the epidemic
16:53	Lilly Anderson	Peaceful coexistence of the world
16:54	Lilly Anderson	Together to fight the epidemic
16:54	Minglo	Fight-the-epidemic
16:54	Minglo	China will win
16:54	Moling	China will win
16:54	Lilly Anderson	China will win
16:55	Lilly Anderson	Fight-the-epidemic

This pattern of behaviour has been observed on other days dating back to at least early June 2020, when the account '永久的爱' shared four Chinese-language videos and posts relating to the death of George Floyd within a period of 16 minutes.

The unconvincing personas, low-to-no friends/followers and coordinated posting patterns are identifiable indicators of inauthentic behaviour in this activity. The content seeded is also consistent with other campaigns identified in previous reports.

Pivot to video content

As noted in Graphika's *Spamouflage goes to America* report, the actors appear to be ramping up their experimentation with video formats. The videos usually consist of a combination of stock footage and media footage, overlaid with English - or Chinese-language subtitles. The subtitles are also read aloud in English by either automated text-to-speech software or, in some cases, by what seem to be real people reading off a script.

The significant variation in the style and quality of the videos, and of the overlaying audio, suggests a similar workflow to that analysed in our *Retweeting through the Great Firewall* report, in which it seemed probable that individual contractors were responsible for generating their own content based on broad centralised tasking.

Using video in this way is not an entirely new tactic for these actors, and examples can be found dating back to at least April 2020. However, there's been a very notable uptick in the number of such videos in September 2020. For the amplifying account 'Kasey Eller', for example, 10 of the 13 posts shared in the past week were videos (Figure 6).

Figure 6: 'Kasey Eller' account time line (the profile image has been redacted as it may have been stolen and used without the individual's consent), captured 31 August 2020
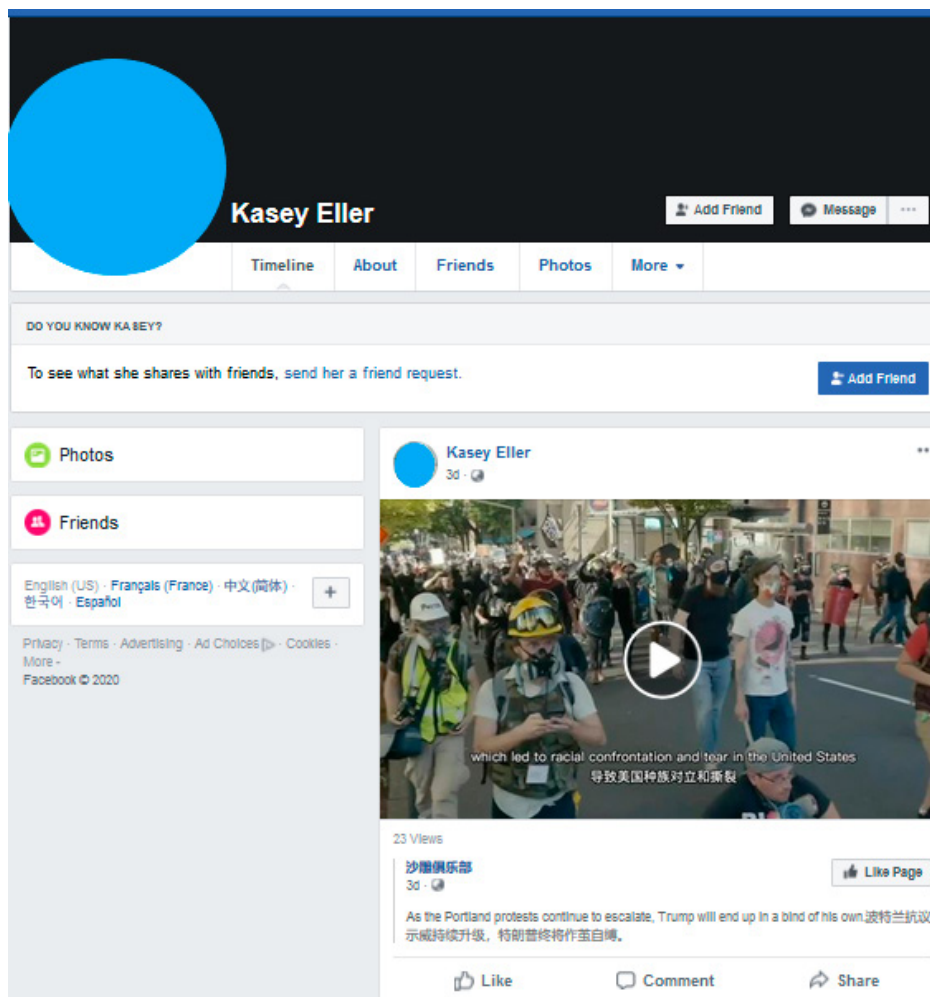
Most of the videos analysed for this report have been uploaded onto Facebook directly, but a minority are linked to from YouTube. As these videos are detected and removed, they're rapidly replaced. For example, on 26 August, 'Kasey Eller' shared a YouTube video titled 'Trump：An Awkward Presidential Re election Dream' (note the use of double-byte font, highlighting added). Double-byte font is commonly used for Chinese language characters, and the use of it for punctuation suggests that the title may have been typed by someone used to writing in Chinese).

As of 31 August, this video had been deleted by YouTube, but a new version appears to have been almost immediately uploaded by the account 'Seaiolnmfrtdy Wakolnmftpodey' (Figure 7).

Figure 7: (L) Facebook post on 26 August from 'Kasey Eller' showing deleted YouTube video, and (R) the same video re-uploaded on 28 August by 'Seaiolnmfrtdy Wakolnmftpodey'
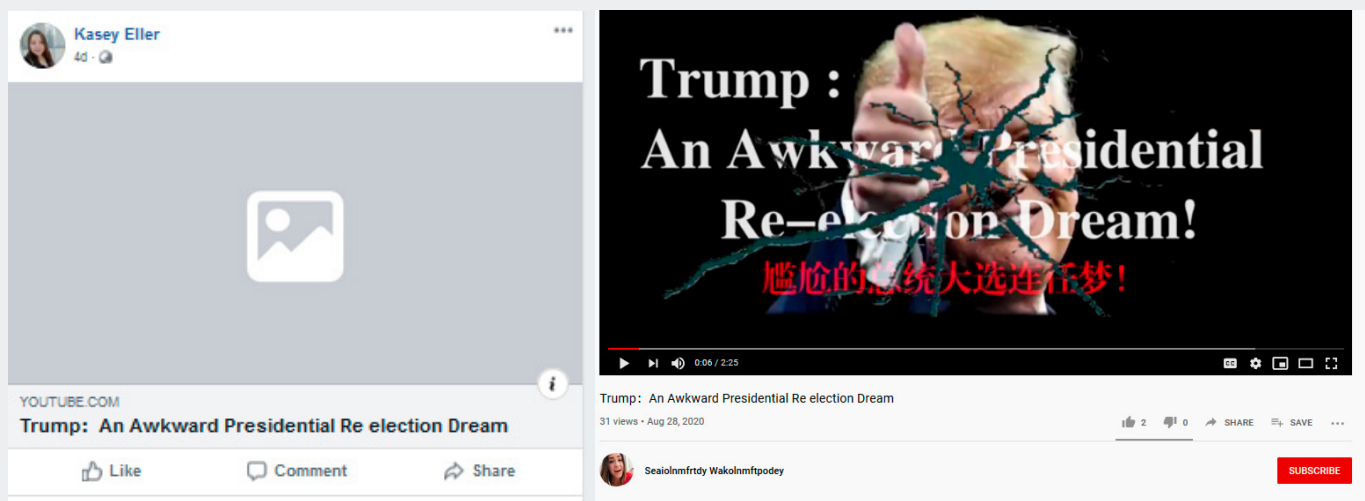
The 'Seaiolnmfrtdy Wakolnmftpodey' account was created on 18 August and has uploaded new versions of a number of older videos associated with the campaign, including 'The epidemic in the United States may be worse?', as well as new videos reacting to breaking events, such as recent shooting deaths at protests in the US (Figure 8).

Figure 8: Video about shootings in Kenosha and other shooting deaths of African-Americans uploaded to 'Seaiolnmfrtdy Wakolnmftpodey' account on 29 August (note that some Chinese autotranslation mistranslates 'Floyd' as 'Freud'), captured 31 August 2020
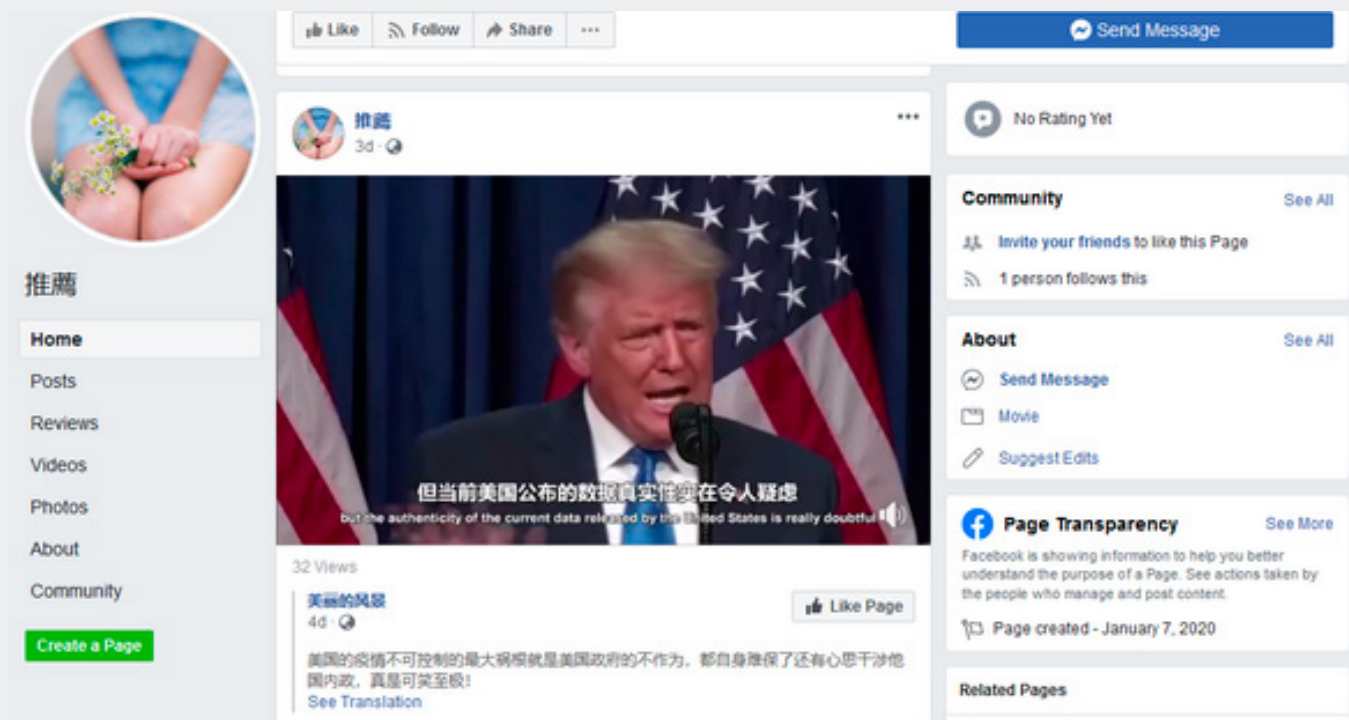
Narratives

This section discusses the narratives linked to Covid-19 that are being propagated in this activity set. It's important to note that influence operations often make use of the selective amplification of true facts, as well as spreading false or misleading information. Some of the narratives themselves don't qualify as mis- or disinformation; however, the coordinated and inauthentic tactics used to amplify them mean that they're still a matter of concern.

Narrative theme 1: The Trump administration has failed catastrophically in its handling of the Covid-19 crisis, and this will hurt Trump's re-election chances

The re-election prospects of President Trump feature significantly in this activity set and are linked to multiple sub-narratives, including the ongoing protests in the US and the coronavirus crisis. Videos and posts accuse Trump of lying about the severity of the crisis, attempting to manipulate statistics on the spread of the virus in the US, and having allowed his own self-interest and incompetence to lead to the deaths of more than a hundred thousand of his own people (Figure 9).

Figure 9: Facebook page, captured 1 September 2020

Narrative theme 2: China is working cooperatively with the international community for the good of all

A second major coronavirus-related narrative is promoting the cooperative and helpful international approach of China in the global pandemic. This is evident in the names of some of the pages (such as 'Together to fight the epidemic' and 'Peaceful coexistence of the world'), as well as in many posts and videos. This narrative emphasises the idea that China's early sacrifices during the initial lockdown 'bought the world time' (which, according to the narrative, the US has squandered). It also holds up China as a model for the rest of the world to follow (Figure 10). This narrative is consistent with broader narratives that have been promoted through Chinese diplomacy and state media.

Figure 10: Video shared on Facebook about China's assistance to other countries in controlling the virus, captured 1 September 2020

Narrative theme 3: The behaviour of the US during the international pandemic has been selfish and destructive

A corollary to the narrative about China's behaviour as a good and responsible member of the international community is contrasting China with the US, which is portrayed as having behaved in a selfish, foolish and destructive manner (Figure 11). This includes spreading cases from the US into other countries and pulling out of international cooperation through bodies such as the World Health Organization.

Figure 11: Side by side screenshots of moments from same video, comparing the relative success of China in controlling the epidemic with the ongoing crisis in the US, captured 1 September 2020

Conclusion

Despite the low level of engagement with these accounts, it's clear that there's a persistent effort to inauthentically shape opinions on fundamental democratic questions, including the US 2020 presidential election, the ongoing protests about racial inequality and police violence in the US, and the profound tragedy of the Covid-19 crisis, as highlighted in this report. This activity bears notable similarities to that seen in previous research into Chinese state-linked activity.

There appears to be ongoing confusion over which audiences this activity is targeted at, and this is likely to be contributing to its very low effectiveness—a confusion that was also a feature in the activity set in our report *Retweeting through the Great Firewall*. For example, the attempts to communicate with both Chinese- and English-speaking audiences at once through subtitles in both languages and low-quality or robotic English narration may simply alienate both sides.

The actors responsible for the inauthentic influence efforts outlined in this report have shown themselves to be well resourced in both their ability to replace accounts and their ability to create a relatively high volume of content (suggesting an investment in time and labour), to be interested in shaping opinions on highly political topics in favour of pro-China narratives, and to be prepared to persist through multiple takedowns and their own failure to generate meaningful engagement. The notable pivot to video discussed in this report also reflects a willingness to experiment with new formats.

It's possible that the phases of influence activity that we've identified in *Tweeting through the Great Firewall*, *Retweeting through the Great Firewall* and this report are exercises in capability development. The switch to video content and use of automated translation builds on the capacity of these operations to rapidly develop inauthentic accounts; however, the audience targeting isn't yet sufficiently precise to drive effects. Those supervising these operations may be satisfied with content production and account creation metrics, without understanding the refinement of messaging and audience segmentation required to drive impact on the global internet.

Barring significant changes (for example, substantially improved detection and enforcement by the social media platforms), we should expect that this activity will continue to persist and evolve. It's important that all stakeholders—governments, civil society and the platforms—remain vigilant and continue to monitor that evolution, as it demonstrates the emerging capabilities and adversarial tactics that actors will deploy to manipulate political discourse as we approach the US presidential election.

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Acknowledgements

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