



Covid-19 disinformation and social media manipulation trends

8 April – 15 April

A range of actors are manipulating the information environment to exploit the Covid-19 crisis for strategic gain. ASPI's International Cyber Policy Centre is tracking many of these state and non-state actors online and will occasionally publish investigative data-driven reporting that will focus on the use of disinformation, propaganda, extremist narratives and conspiracy theories. The bulk of ASPI's data analysis uses our in-house *Influence Tracker* tool—a machine learning and data analytics capability that draws out insights from multi-language social media datasets. This report includes three case studies that feature China, Taiwan, Russia and Africa.

Summary

- ASPI's analysis of our Twitter dataset of Chinese diplomatic and state media accounts this week (8–15 April) shows that Chinese state-sponsored messaging has sought to leverage the World Health Organization (WHO) and its regional affiliate, the Pan American Health Organization, to demonstrate willing and transparent engagement with global health governance structures.ⁱ
- China's containment of the pandemic, economic recovery and global engagement are consistent themes on diplomatic Twitter accounts and state media. Coordinated messaging across diplomatic social media accounts and state media signal a focus on diplomatic relationships with Africa, in part to respond to negative coverage in Western media of the plight of African residents facing eviction in Chinese cities. China's crisis response engagement with regional bodies features significantly.
- Elements of China's messaging continue to demonstrate disinformation tactics similar to coordinated and persistent Russian state-sponsored disinformation campaigns and the Chinese state's efforts to contest the information domain are supported by coordinated, although not necessarily inauthentic, pro-China patriotic trolling.
- Russia-aligned disinformation is exploiting the health crisis as it unfolds in Africa to exacerbate tensions with the West.
- Russia-linked actors are capitalising on missteps by the west by amplifying them overtly through state-sponsored media outlets and by leveraging a network of Facebook groups previously identified as part of a Russian information operation targeting African countries.

1. Overview of Chinese state-sponsored messaging on Twitter

China's state-sponsored messaging about the WHO tends towards positive sentiment. The French-language (commonly used in Africa) version of the WHO hashtag—#OMS—is one of the top 20 most frequently used hashtags over the week in the ASPI Influence Tracker dataset of Chinese diplomatic and state media Twitter accounts. Through the high-profile accounts of Hua Chunying and Lijian Zhao, China's Ministry of Foreign Affairs is exploiting tensions about the performance of the WHO.

Hua Chunying (9 April) asserted China's committed engagement with the international body, contrasting China's level of transparency with the WHO with that of the US. Hua's tweet was sandwiched between 'timelines' released by *Xinhua*ⁱⁱ and *CGTN*ⁱⁱⁱ of both China's and the WHO's response to the pandemic. *CGTN*'s timeline of the WHO's response was amplified across China's diplomatic and state media accounts, becoming the second most shared URL by those accounts. Zhao used the controversy about Taiwan's relationship with the WHO to reassert the 'One China' principle.



Xi says China will continue to support Africa in COVID-19 battle, capacity building

Source: Xinhua | 2020-04-09 09:54:37 | Editor: huaxia

Figure 1: Most shared URL shows promotion of China's support for Africa's COVID-19 response

dataset of Chinese diplomatic and state media accounts was a tweet from the World Intellectual Property Organization, which incorporated an animated graphic noting China overtaking the US through 2019 in the filing of international patents. The URL most shared across the dataset (see *Figure 1*) is an article from *Xinhua* that focuses on China's willingness to support Africa's COVID-19 response, focusing on a phone call between President Xi and President Ramaphosa of South Africa.

Elements of the messaging analysed by ASPI's *Influence Tracker* display techniques associated with Russian disinformation tactics. First, there's temporal alignment in the content themes on the Twitter accounts of diplomats, embassies and state media. Second, in an approach similar to that of Russian state media, in an effort to assert discourse power, China's coordinated messaging directly mirrors themes that emerge from Western media coverage. The Chinese state's efforts to contest the information domain are supported by coordinated, although not necessarily inauthentic, pro-China patriotic trolling (the following section provides a case study of a coordinated pro-China campaign, closely aligned in content and time frame with state-driven messaging, although not necessarily state directed).

Third, China's diplomats and state media are using Western voices such as US officials and politicians (see *Figure 2*) and foreigners residing in China as a vehicle for manipulating the information environment.

China's response was consistently favourably compared with those of Europe and the US. Diplomatic accounts assert China's engagement with regional bodies such as ASEAN, the Arab League and the African Union. ASPI's *Influence Tracker* shows that one of the top URL shares across the



Figure 2: Spinning Senator Tom Cotton's comments to deflect claims of Chinese state-sponsored disinformation

MOST READ



Japan spends \$2.2 billion to get Japanese companies to exit China



A different view: How China 'LIED' to the world about coronavirus?

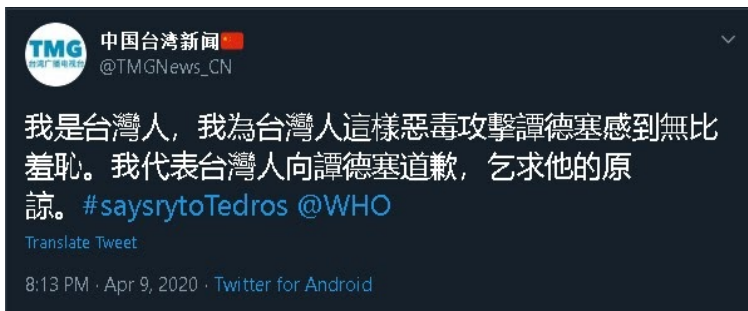
Figure 3: Swedish student's social media post as 2nd most read feature on Vietnam Insider

For example, through 8–15 April Chinese diplomatic and state media accounts exploited a Facebook post from a Swedish student living in Ningbo, in which the student used colloquial language to praise China's pandemic controls compared to the inadequate response of 'the West', which has become dependent on Chinese medical assistance as a result.^{iv} The article was reposted from *CGTN* to *Vietnam Insider*: that URL features as the twelfth most shared in the *Influence Tracker* dataset, and the article shows as the second most popular feature on the *Vietnam Insider* site (at 16 April – see *Figure 3*). Other approaches include spinning commentary from US voices such as Senator Tom Cotton (see *Figure 2*) to deflect claims of Chinese state-sponsored disinformation.

2. Coordinated anti-Taiwan trolling: #saysrytoTedros

After Dr Tedros Adhanom, the WHO Director-General, accused Taiwan of racial attacks against him, a network of sixty-five accounts purporting to be Taiwanese netizens started apologising to him via the hashtag #saysrytoTedros. Sixty percent of these accounts originally tweeted in simplified Chinese characters (used on the mainland) but switched to traditional characters (used in Taiwan) to tweet the apologies.

The first tweet (see *Figure 4*) occurred at 8.13pm (6.13pm China Standard Time) on 9 April 2020 from the *TMG News* account:



English translation: *I am a Taiwanese, and I am extremely ashamed that the Taiwanese have attacked Tedros maliciously. On behalf of the Taiwanese, I apologize to Tedros and beg for his forgiveness. #saysrytoTedros @WHO*

Figure 4: The first tweet apologising to Tedros with #saysrytoTedros

This was retweeted by the 'RFXZ_China'^v and 'RCRC_Chinese'^{vi} accounts, followed by a stream of accounts (some of which have now been suspended) copying the apology in Chinese and English until 5.00am the next day. At 9.00am, William Yang, a correspondent for *DW Hotspot Asia*,^{vii} noticed the campaign before it was picked up by the Taiwanese Investigative Bureau.^{viii} Overall, 60% of the 65 unique accounts posted more than 100 tweets 'apologising' on behalf of Taiwan over the period from 8.00pm to 5.00am.



Network analysis (see *Figure 5*) of the ‘following’ lists of these 65 accounts shows a cluster of commonly followed accounts. The network graph opposite is coloured and sized by the number of followers in the group; small white nodes represent accounts with little followers, and large orange circles show multiple followers.

The most commonly followed accounts in the centre are ‘zlj517’ (Lijian Zhao) and ‘SpokespersonCHN’. Another commonly followed account is ‘realdonaldtrump’. Other Chinese state-linked accounts included in this cluster are: ‘mfa_china’, ‘cgntofficial’, and ‘xhnews’.

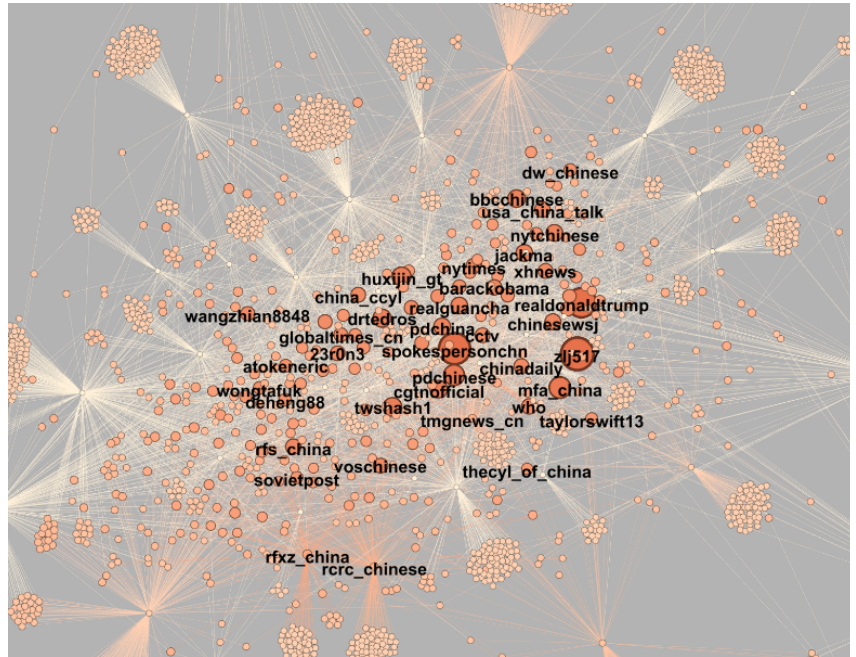


Figure 5: Network graph of accounts followed by those tweeting #saysrytoTedros

Common features of those accounts indicate that they might be inauthentic and part of a broader campaign. Those features include:

- following Chinese state associated accounts, such as ‘zlj517’ and ‘SpokespersonCHN’;
- following popular Western accounts, such as ‘realdonaldtrump’ and ‘taylorswift13’ but with a lack of other non-celebrity or genuine accounts;
- limited accounts following back;
- recent creation dates;
- periods of inactivity and inconsistent activity;
- retweets of known trolls or propaganda outlets.

3. Russian and Chinese Covid-19 disinformation in Africa

Misinformation, disinformation and conspiracy theories relating to vaccines are a growing problem in many African nations.^{ix} A Facebook post (see *Figure 6* below) claiming that a hospital in Nairobi was burned by angry residents after discovering a ‘poisoned’ batch of Covid-19 vaccinations from the US had been shared more than 9,600 times as of 9 April. There appears to be no reporting by media of an attack on a Kenyan hospital, and the images from the Facebook post come from a range of sources including a 2017 Deutsche Welle report^x about protests in the Democratic Republic of Congo and a 2019 attack on a hospital in Cameroon.^{xi}



Figure 6: Facebook post claiming poisoned Covid-19 vaccinations from the US

The post has been shared across Facebook groups in multiple countries, including the Central African Republic, Cameroon^{xii} and Madagascar.^{xiii}

Russia-linked actors have sought to exploit a controversy sparked when French medical scientists suggested in a television interview that a Covid-19 vaccine should be tested in Africa.^{xiv} The comments by the doctors met with a strong reaction on social media, and hashtags including #Africansarenotlabrats and #Africansarenotguineapigs gained significant and largely authentic traction. Russia-linked actors have sought to capitalise on this genuine outrage in a number of ways.

Overtly state-sponsored outlets such as *RT* and *Sputnik* dedicated substantial coverage to the incident in multiple languages, including entire articles about outraged social media reactions accusing the West of racism and colonialism.^{xv} US-based *RT* affiliate *Soapbox* created a Facebook video (see *Figure 7*) about the incident aimed at Western audiences.^{xvi}

The controversy has also been amplified through Facebook groups previously identified as part of a Russian information operation targeting African countries.^{xvii} For example, the controversy was the primary focus of activity on the Central African-based Facebook group *Jeunesse derrière la Russie* between 3 April, when the French doctors' comments went viral, and 5 April, including at least 17 posts focused on the topic shared over that period.^{xviii} This behaviour isn't necessarily inauthentic, but may reflect efforts to direct the social media conversation as part of Russia's broader efforts to undermine Western, particularly French, influence in Africa.

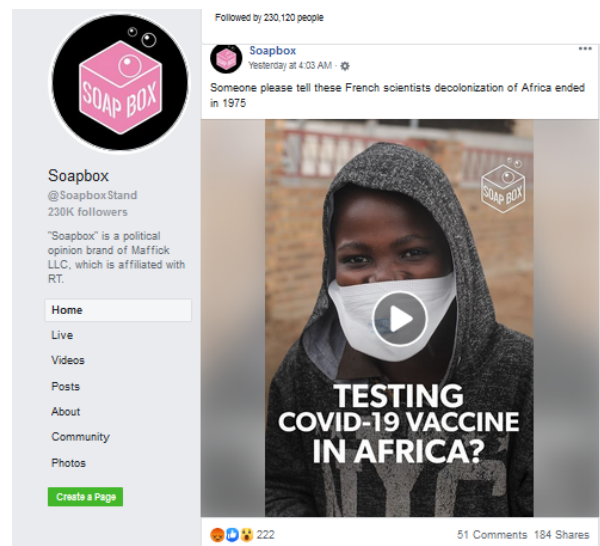


Figure 7: RT affiliate video exploiting controversy about vaccine testing in Africa

Other actors are also seeking to influence the narrative about the Covid-19 crisis in Africa. Chinese television channel *Star Times*, which has significant audience share in many parts of Africa, has launched a daily show presenting news about the crisis for an African audience.^{xix}



- ⁱ The bulk of ASPI's data analysis uses our in-house *Influence Tracker* tool—a machine learning and data analytics capability that draws out insights from multi-language social media datasets. This new tool can ingest data in multiple languages and auto-translate, producing insights on topics, sentiment, shared content, influential accounts, metrics of impact and posting patterns.
- ⁱⁱ 'China publishes timeline on COVID-19 information sharing, int'l cooperation', *Xinhuanet*, 6 April 2020, [online](#).
- ⁱⁱⁱ 'WHO releases timeline of its actions against COVID-19', *CGTN*, 13 April 2020, [online](#).
- ^{iv} Ma Zhenhuan, 'Swede in Ningbo gets global attention with post on COVID-19 response', *China Daily*, 14 April 2020, [online](#).
- ^v 'Free xuzhou radio', *Twitter*, 3 April 2020, [online](#) (in Chinese).
- ^{vi} 'Communist Red Cross Radio', *Twitter*, [online](#).
- ^{vii} William Yang, *Twitter*, 10 April 2020, [online](#).
- ^{viii} William Yang, *Twitter*, 10 April 2020, [online](#).
- ^{ix} Kyle Cowan, 'FACT CHECK: How a lie about Bill Gates and a vaccine for the coronavirus exploded on *Twitter*', *News24*, 7 April 2020, [online](#).
- ^x Patrick Kasonde, 'RDC : Manifestations à Lubumbashi' [DRC: Protests in Lubumbashi], *DW*, 16 November 2017, [online](#) (in French).
- ^{xi} 'Cameroon: 4 die of fire, 5 cars burnt in Kumba District hospital inferno', *Freelafric*, no date, online.
- ^{xii} Songue Raphael, *Facebook*, 4 April 2020, [online](#).
- ^{xiii} Aina Razaf, *Facebook*, 4 April 2020, [online](#).
- ^{xiv} Rebecca Rosman, 'Racism row as French doctors suggest virus vaccine test in Africa', *al-Jazeera*, 4 April 2020, [online](#).
- ^{xv} 'Covid-19 : une séquence sur le test d'un vaccin en Afrique fait polémique' [Covid-19: a sequence on the test of a vaccine in Africa is controversial], *RT France*, 3 April 2020, [online](#) (in French).
- ^{xvi} 'Soapbox Stand', *Facebook*, 4 April 2020, [online](#).
- ^{xvii} Elise Thomas, 'What happens when the same techniques used to interfere with US elections are adapted to a war zone in the heart of Africa? The results are brutal.', *Daily Beast*, 23 March 2019, [online](#).
- ^{xviii} Jeunesse derrière la Russie, *Facebook*, 4 April 2020, [online \(in French\)](#).
- ^{xix} 'StarTimes Daily, COVID-19 report', *YouTube*, 6 April 2020, [online](#).