

COVID-19 Attracts Patriotic Troll Campaigns in Support of China's Geopolitical Interests

By Elise Thomas and Albert Zhang

Over the past several weeks, a loosely coordinated pro-China trolling campaign on Twitter has:

- Harassed Western media outlets
- Impersonated Taiwanese users in an effort to undermine Taiwan's position with the World Health Organisation (WHO)
- Spread false information about the COVID-19 outbreak
- Joined in pre-existing inauthentic social media campaigns.

At this stage, there's no clear evidence of state direction behind this trolling campaign. However, the trolling campaign is having a significant political impact, including being [publicly identified](#) by Taiwan's Investigation Bureau as interfering in the already complex relationship between Taiwan and the WHO.

Although some trolling began earlier in 2020, the main campaign appears to have picked up steam around mid-March as a loose network of Twitter accounts [designed to mimic and harass Western media](#) publishing in Mandarin. Some accounts appear to have been created specifically for the campaign, while some older accounts were repurposed, including by being equipped with Twitter handles and profile pictures that closely imitate the Chinese-language accounts of outlets such as the *Wall Street Journal* and the *BBC* (Figures 1 and 2).

Figure 1: Screenshots of the *Wall Street Journal's* Chinese-language Twitter account (left) and the 'Nanjing Street Journal' troll account (right).



Figure 2: Screenshots of *Radio Free Asia's* Chinese-language account (@RFA_Chinese, left) and @RFA_China troll account (right). *Radio Free Asia* has been a particularly prominent focus of the trolling campaign.



It seems unlikely that many of these accounts were genuinely attempting to fool anyone; instead, the goal appears to be to troll and irritate Western media outlets and possibly to confuse readers. In addition to imitating the Western media accounts, the troll accounts engage in targeted harassment of the real accounts, for example by replying to their tweets with abusive messages or asserting that the troll account is the real one (Figure 3).

Figure 3: Screenshot of tweet from @RCUS_American troll account accusing the authentic Radio Free Asia Twitter account of being an impersonator



Note: A number of the troll accounts link to porn sites.

It's unlikely to be a coincidence that this coordinated harassment of Western media organisations took off within days of the decision by China to expel journalists from three US newspapers. That's not necessarily an indication of state direction, however, and may simply reflect nationalistic pro-China trolls responding on their own initiative to events as they unfold.

On April 9th some of these trolls sought to stir tensions between Taiwan and the World Health Organisation by impersonating Taiwanese netizens. The previous day, WHO Director-General Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus accused Taiwan of racial attacks against him, which Taiwan strongly denied.

That evening, accounts that had previously tweeted in simplified Chinese (used in mainland China) started tweeting 'apologies' to Tedros using traditional characters (used in Taiwan). The apologies were copy-and-pastes of the same phrase, and English versions of the apology were also disseminated by similar accounts.

Figure 4: Screenshot of fake 'Radio Free Sichuan' account (@RFS_China), recruiting trolls at 3:21 pm AEST (1:21 pm CST), only hours prior to the #saysrytoTedros campaign, and later retweeted by [Radio Communism Red Cross](#), one of the first accounts to post a fake apology



English translation: [Notice] Free Sichuan Radio urgently hires an editor. Please reply quickly under the tweet, limited to familiar friends who can push up for a long time. Please open if it was replied before 2:30.

[ASPI analysis](#) of the 'following' lists of the apologising accounts, including those of the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Zhao Lijian and Hua Chunying (who both work for the ministry's Information Department), in addition to state-owned media accounts such as *China Global Television Network* and *Xinhua News*. Other similar features among the network of troll accounts suggest a coordinated campaign to bolster the #saysrytoTedros trend (Figure 4).

In addition to their own coordinated inauthentic behaviour, the trolls are also jumping on the bandwagon with other pre-existing coordinated inauthentic campaigns on Twitter.

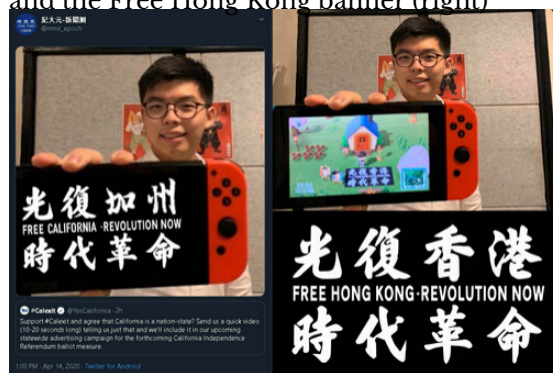
For example, since early April 2020 there's been significant activity from what appear to be inauthentic accounts linked to Iran, in support of a supposed Californian secession movement (Figure 5). The suspicious Twitter activity comes after an organisation (which has long-standing ties to Russia) calling for California to leave the US and seek independence [made overtures](#) to Iran in April 2020. A number of the pro-China troll accounts have picked up on that by amplifying the Iranian-linked tweets and creating their own pro-Californian-independence content, in some cases posing as Taiwanese users and pretending that Taiwan supports Californian independence (the goal being, presumably, to attempt to drive a wedge between Taiwan and the United States).

Figure 5: Screenshots ([left](#), [right](#)) showing troll accounts claiming to be Taiwanese, alleging that Taiwan supports Californian independence, and retweeting an Iranian-linked account also boosting Californian secession



Trolls have also attempted to draw similarities between the 'Yes California' campaign and the Hong Kong independence movement. In addition to simply spreading disinformation, this might be an attempt to draw attention from Western audiences that have supported the 'Free Hong Kong' campaign. Those posts also coincided with the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) crackdowns during the coronavirus pandemic, including the ban of Nintendo's 'Animal Crossing' game. Chinese netizens [blame](#) Hong Kong protest leader Joshua Wong for the prohibition and have exploited his meme generator to add the 'Free California' campaign (Figures 6).

Figure 6: Screenshot of troll account retweeting @YesCalifornia and sharing a doctored image of Hong Kong protest leader Joshua Wong (left), alongside the real image and the Free Hong Kong banner (right)



A small number of accounts linked to the trolling campaign appear to be experimenting with spreading fake news in English as well as in Mandarin. For example, the 'Liberty New News' account (@NewLnn) claims to be located in New York (locations on Twitter profiles are manually entered by the user and don't necessarily reflect their physical location), and its bio reads 'global news/ sealing news/Twitter branches/ democracy standpoint/ neutral standpoint/ professional journalist/ report truth.'

Figure 7: Screenshot of tweet from 'Liberty New News'.



'Liberty New News' does not report truth. On April 16th, for example, the account tweeted about a supposed protest for Californian independence taking place and asking for the CCP to take over California (Figure 7). No such protest took place; the photograph accompanying the tweet came from an earlier unrelated protest at Berkeley in 2017 (see photo from the same protest [here](#)). It's hard to say whether this is a serious, albeit inept, attempt to fool anyone, or simply more trolling.

The same account has also sought to emphasise racial tensions in the United States (Figure 8). It's noteworthy that this comes at the same time as a [major diplomatic and social media backlash](#) over the ill-treatment of African immigrants in China.

Figure 8: Screenshot of 'Liberty New News' tweets from April 17th and April 18th 2020.



A notable feature of the trolling campaign is the persistence of the trolls. Many accounts involved in the trolling have been deleted by Twitter, only to return within days or even hours. For example, when the 'NMSL News' account at @NMSL_Chinese was deleted, it swiftly returned as @NMSL_FakeNews. 'NMSL' is Chinese internet slang for 'Your mother is dead' - an insult regularly levelled against targets by Chinese nationalist trolls (Figure 9).

Figure 9: Screenshot showing banned @NMSL_Chinese account and recently created @NMSL_FakeNews.



As earlier stated, there is no evidence at this stage to suggest that this activity is state-directed. Their trolling does, however, appear to align with Chinese state interests on issues such as Taiwan, and with efforts by the Chinese government and state media to defend China's handling of the COVID-19 crisis. As the Taiwanese example shows, this kind of patriotic trolling has the potential to have a significant impact on politically sensitive issues. As Chinese diplomatic and state activity intensifies on Twitter, it is likely that we will also see patriotic troll campaigns in support of China's geopolitical interests continue to rise alongside state-led efforts.

About this Reporting

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, rapid 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. Previous reports can be found here.