CONVERGE COVID-19 Working Groups for Public Health and Social Sciences Research

Research Agenda-Setting Paper

This paper was written to help advance convergence-oriented research in the hazards and disaster field. It highlights areas where additional research could contribute new knowledge to the response to and recovery from the pandemic and other disasters yet to come. Questions about the research topics and ethical and methodological issues highlighted here should be directed to the authors who contributed to this paper.

Working Group Name:

Mapping China's Public Diplomacy Operations on Twitter during the COVID-19 Crisis

Working Group Description:

This Working Group plans to conduct computational analyses of China's Public Diplomacy Operations on Twitter in reframing public health discourses on COVID-19. This involves mapping out the information networks and content of diplomats, state-owned English news outlets, and state-mobilized anonymous influencers, as well as quantifying the scope of diffusion, the level of coordination, and the agenda-setting power of the state actors, in comparison to international broadcasters in the US, UK, Japan, Korea, Russia, Latin America, and the Middle East. The work complements the existing fact-checking-oriented approaches to the "infodemic" by refocusing on the geopolitical origin of public health discourses.

Priority Research Topics and Specific Research Questions:

Priority Research Topics	Potential Research Questions
1. Actors and audiences in China's digital public diplomacy campaigns on COVID-19. This line of research builds on the literature on *stakeholder engagement* and *connective actions*, through a study of the practice of stakeholder-targeting (through @mention on Twitter) and hashtag communities observed in tweets from Chinese state media and diplomats. By applying socio-semantic network analysis (Wonneberger, Hellsten, and Jacobs, 2020), we aim to construct the intended audiences and stakeholders in the digital diplomacy campaign, and to address the lack of attention paid to stakeholder targeting and connective actions in the public diplomacy literature. Wonneberger, A., Hellsten, I. R., & Jacobs, S. H. (2020). Hashtag activism and the configuration of counterpublics: Dutch animal welfare debates on Twitter. *Information, Communication & Society*, 1-18.	• RQ1: What issue communities does China's digital public diplomacy campaign seek to connect with? • RQ2: What domestic and international stakeholders does China's digital public diplomacy campaign seek to target? • RQ3: Can issues and stakeholders identified through socio-semantic network analysis reflect broader shifts in China's policy position and geopolitical contention? We have performed several preliminary analyses and found the following: • Hashtags used by state media and diplomats reflect fluid developments on the ground. No clear evidence of using partisan hashtags that may resonate with politically-motivated foreign constituencies (this contrasts with RT's strategy of divide and conquer); • Some hashtags reflect the theme of telling China's stories (e.g., #chinastory);

	• Most frequently mentioned stakeholders include Chinese enterprises (e.g., Alibaba and Huawei), international business (Tesla), and international bodies (e.g., WHO and UN). The tie to WHO warrants a further investigation.
2. Coordination and propagators in China's digital public diplomacy campaigns on COVID-19. Given the recent media coverage of Chinese states using bots and strategically embedded influencer accounts to amplify its narratives (ProPublica, 2020; Zhong, Krolik, Mozur, Bergman & Wong, 2020), we are interested in examining to what extend the digital public diplomacy campaigns garners authentic attention and engagement, as well as the algorithmic practices used in message dissemination. This research line maps out the initial retweeting network and the coordination (through co-tweeting and common topical coverage) among state actors in pushing forward certain narratives.	• RQ1: To what extent are diplomats and state media outlets engaged in coordinated tweeting about common topics/themes? • RQ2: Who are the initial propagators of the public diplomacy messages in terms of their level of influence, location, and authenticity? Based on preliminary analyses, we found that a fair number of initial retweeters of the state-sponsored messages are news bots—notably some bots were set up to retweet exclusively Chinese and Russian state media outlets and the bots operated from the so-called BRI countries such as Pakistan, Sri Lanka, and Russia. Patriotic and nationalist accounts were also found among the frequent retweeters and they feature anti-west rhetoric, commenting on the Hong Kong protest and the recent civil unrest in the US. Chinese diplomats, to a lesser degree, helped buoy the messages. We plan to verify if this diffusion pattern also applies to other international broader.
3. Blend in or stand out – A computational analysis of Chinese state media's agenda-setting power on the global stage. State-sponsored international broadcasters such as CGTN and Russia Today seek to challenge the global media landscape which is largely dominated by western powers. They can take more combative, divide-and-conquer approach as exemplified by Russia Today's coverage of partisan issues and conspiracy theories to delegitimize western governments (Yablokov, 2015). Another strategy is blending in and following the styles and agenda set by mainstream western media outlets. In this project, we examine who set media agenda for Chinese state media, by using computational text analysis (i.e., RNewsflow algorithms and textnets) to measure longitudinal content homogeneity and diffusion patterns between and across Chinese state media and international broadcasters (e.g., BBC, Reuters, RT, Al Jazeera, etc.). Yablokov, I. (2015). Conspiracy theories as a Russian public diplomacy tool: The case of Russia Today (RT). Politics, 35(3-4), 301-315.	• RQ1: To what extent do media agendas converge between Chinese state media and international broadcasters in the west, Russia, Latin America, the Middle East, Japan and Korea? • RQ2: To what extent do Chinese media set agenda for other international broadcasters? We have identified varied agendas that exist among Chinese state media outlets: some are more aligned with mainstream Western media outlets, while other outlets feature distinct agendas.
4. China's strategic narratives on Twitter and country's foreign policy interests in the new Cold-War era. This is planned to be a macro-level analysis of China's shifting foreign policies as they are reflected in the country's digital public relations campaign, with a focus on the so-called wolf warrior diplomacy and celebrity/influencer diplomats (e.g., @zlj517)	• RQ1: To what extent do China's strategic narratives on Twitter reflect the country's dynamic foreign policy interests?

Ethical / Methodological Considerations:

We analyze publicly available datasets pertaining to activities of well-known institutions and public figures. The data collection may include behaviors of average digital users and in such case, all analyses are conducted at the aggregated level to protect user privacy and anonymity. Our main methodological concerns are:

The time-consuming process of hydrating Twitter data. Per Twitter's terms of use, all publicly shared Twitter datasets contain only Twitter IDs. In order to collect the metadata (tweet content, timestamps, senders, retweeters, and included hashtags and URLs), we need to run Python scripts to parse the relevant data based on the Twitter IDs (a process known as hydration). This process is time-consuming and requires multiple computing devices running 24/7. While we have successfully parsed all original COVID-related tweets dated back to January, the hydration of retweets takes much longer. We are expected to speed up the process as we bring in more computer scientists and computing devices.

Part of our analysis involves bot detection (which can be readily applied by using bot-detection algorithms). However, we are also interested in studying activities of identified bots and such data will become unavailable right after Twitter takes down the bots. We are finding ways to efficiently identify bots and collect their activities in the diffusion networks.

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This COVID-19 Working Group effort was supported by the National Science Foundation-funded Social Science Extreme Events Research (SSEER) network and the CONVERGE facility at the Natural Hazards Center at the University of Colorado Boulder (NSF Award #1841338). Any opinions, findings, and conclusions or recommendations expressed in this material are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the views of the NSF, SSEER, or CONVERGE.