

China's Turn to Twiplomacy: Efforts to Counter Negative Narratives Online

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Abstract

The COVID-19 spread rapidly and infects many countries which caused China to receive criticism from several countries, one of which is the United States, which accused China of being the source of the outbreak and hid the information about the outbreak of the Coronavirus. This makes China do everything possible to counter the accusations that they are the source of the outbreak and try to rebuild its positive image. China started conducting digital diplomacy through Twitter, which we will call 'Chinese Twiplomacy'. This study aims to examine China's efforts to counter negative narratives during COVID-19 pandemic. It finds that China has been used bot accounts to boost their persona online by multiple strategies such as donations of medical supplies overseas to frame its image as a responsible global leader and offering some cash to the Chinese influencers to post positive messages.

Keywords

COVID-19, China, Twitter, Twiplomacy, "*Wolf-Warriors*".

1. Introduction

The World Health Organization (2020) declared in December 2019 the outbreak of respiratory diseases caused by the new coronavirus was detected in Wuhan, Hubei Province, China. The COVID-19 spread rapidly and infects many countries which caused China to receive criticism from several countries, particularly the USA, which accused China of being the source of the outbreak and hid the information about the outbreak of the Coronavirus. Rizky (2020) suggests that China is faced with the possibility of domestic social and economic upheaval, the Regime cannot let this issue affecting negatively to its geopolitical influence. Alden and Chan (2021) examine the three possible intertwined reasons for China to conduct a digital diplomacy offensive through Twitter. The first reason is that Twitter enables China to reach an international audience rapidly and effectively, also Twitter has the hashtag feature that facilitates seeing content related to it. The second reason is Twitter allows China to look after and gauge international public opinion. The third reason why China uses Twitter officially is because its governments can easily recognize the impact that the platform offers related to public diplomacy and pushing back the negative narratives online, despite the fact that China previously was not proactive in using Twitter.

Farras (2019) reported that China is also known to have many laws and regulations prohibiting inappropriate and illegal online content introduced by the Cyber Administration of China (CAC) in November 2018 ordering all social media platforms that can upload short videos, live streaming, any kind of microblog, to periodically assess their risk when it comes to mass mobilization, even China has a complex network of internet filtering systems as known as the Great Firewall which is used to block access to thousands of foreign websites, consequently the online daily newspaper The New York. The Times and social networks like Google, Twitter and Facebook are banned in China. Even China has made alternative applications for the platforms they banned, for example Baidu for Google, Weibo for Twitter, and iQiyi for Netflix, and several other Chinese brands.

Nurbaya (2017) examine the reason why China banned Twitter and other Western social media in their country, so that Chinese people won't protest on social media that can quickly trigger other Chinese people, the applications

that can trigger these demonstrations in China will be quickly blocked. China is also known prefer traditional diplomacy with face-to-face to convey their narrative abroad, but due to the COVID-19 pandemic, it is very difficult for them to carry out face-to-face diplomacy activities, where all state diplomacy activities are carried out online and social media has become more important to communicate foreign policy issues around the world. Chabinski and Shixin (2021) explain that in early 2020, Chinese representatives in Europe escalated their online activity through Twitter, aiming to protect China's reputation that has been ruined by the outbreak of COVID-19, that made China labelled as the source of Coronavirus which first appeared in Wuhan, China. This is the first time Chinese's official diplomacy has used their new presence on Twitter to present, disseminate and support their narrative overseas.

1.1 Objectives

In this study, we examine the various efforts of the Chinese diplomats in using Twitter as a tool for carrying out its propaganda. We aim to answer the following questions: "how does the Chinese government develop the spread of its propaganda on Twitter?" and "how do Chinese diplomats use Twitter to counter negative narratives online?"

2. Literature Review: Twitter and Diplomacy

Manor and Segev (2020) mentioned that Twitter will probably makes us more oriented with only 20 seconds rather than spending an hour scrolling through various Ministries' websites, a platform where we can get the information needed, also as an information resource to learn about happening issues related to politics and global (Rufai and Bunce 2020; Prihatini 2020; Prihatini and Halimatusa'diyah 2021). Twitter may indicate an effective tool for world leaders to communicate information notably quickly and directly about COVID-19 to netizens. Twitter is a free microblogging social media website with 152 million registered daily users. Furthermore, over 500 million people visit Twitter per month without logging into an account.

Meodia (2019) reported that Twitter Indonesia's Head of Public Policy, Agung Yudha, said the social media is now a place for digital diplomacy in line with current technological developments. The communication world is changing at this time, which makes a change in the way of communicating in diplomatic terms, where almost all leaders use the Twitter platform, as many as 951 Twitter accounts are owned by world leaders. Twitter is the most used platform by world leaders. Facebook is second with 677 accounts, while Instagram is third with 403 accounts. That is because Twitter content is "live." Twitter was created to discuss things and is usually a place to meet people we don't know personally. The conversations that arise on Twitter support diplomatic efforts, so the conversations that are currently trending on Twitter are often used by embassy accounts to promote themselves.

Michael Haman (2019) argues that netizens can easily discover the government measures applied to combat the epidemic and the current situation of the country as a whole during a pandemic assuming the government Twitter's accounts offer the information they need. The information gathered by a person from twitter also has social utility which can be discussed later with their family or colleagues. Many studies have shown that some Twitter users primarily use the platform to fulfil their information needs. State leaders who tweet more frequently tend to get more Twitter followers. As a result, when State leaders provide information to fulfil their needs during a health emergency, netizens prefer to listen and end up following their account, because there are fewer reasons and less motivation to follow inactive accounts. By connecting people to people, people to government, and government to people, Twitter empowers any country's leader to engage in public diplomacy in a more relevant manner. In social media, particularly Twitter has supplanted traditional forms of communication to reach out to the public. Twitter allows communication to proceed more quickly, despite the fact that it can only write in 140 characters. It can be concluded that Twitter is important as a form of communication for governments. Especially, during a crisis when many people want answers for every question they have and are confused about the steps for safety they should take or follow next (Figure 1).

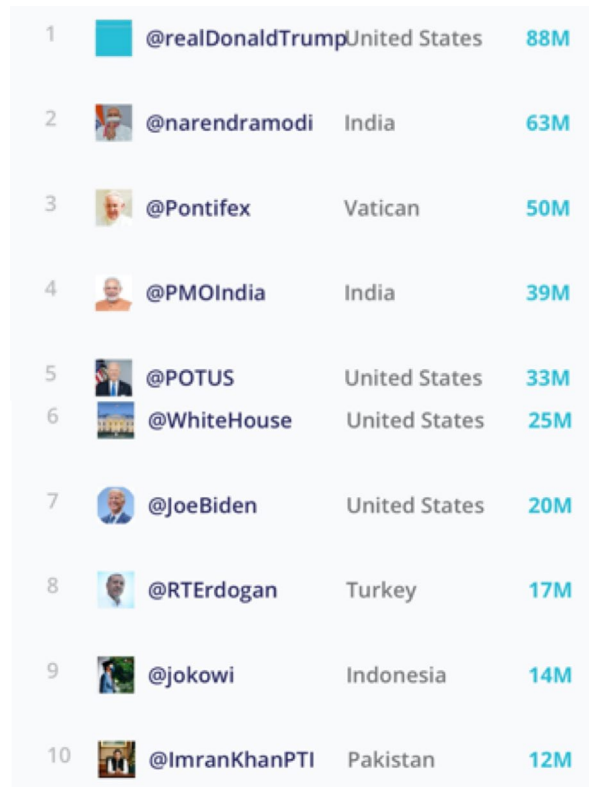


Figure 1. Top 10 Most Followed Leaders (Source: Twiplomacy.com)

According to Twiplomacy (2020) this data was collected on November 9, 2020. It shows that the Twitter account that has the most followers on Twitter is at the top of the social ranking. Harris (2013) asserts that the use of social media has allowed political representatives to engage in branding and promoting certain personas to their audiences. Whether it's a message from a company, netizens, or the government, social media is an effective way to reach a specific audience. The use of social media in politics has proven to be an effective instrument for gaining popular support and, as a result, has strategic value in public diplomacy. While social media can be used to clear up misunderstandings, it can also be used to spread disinformation.

Costa (2017) also stressed that the social media presence makes diplomats have direct access to their audiences, can participate in continual discourse with them, and do so in real time. Governments no longer have to rely on foreign media to communicate their views on events; instead, they can examine those events directly on their own social media accounts. There are 173 countries with Twitter accounts for governments and foreign ministries, representing 90% of all UN countries.

Chhabra (2020) notes that the increasing use of social media platforms by a country aims to achieve its foreign policy and proactively manage its image and reputation. The use of Twitter in carried out diplomacy by many State leaders is known as Twiplomacy. When a State leader tweets about a world event or a new policy framework, other politicians turn to the mainstream media to reply to the tweet or retweet, or simply to give their opinion on the issue. These replies, in turn, add to the online discussions that consequently shape public opinion. With the increasing number of Twitter accounts devoted to politicians, diplomats, and heads of state and diplomatic interactions via Twitter, it has shown the importance of Twitter in diplomacy. In 2011, the term "Twiplomacy" was used in research conducted on the use of Twitter by state leaders or representatives.

Urcan (2020) defines that each state leader has a different style of using twitter, there are some tweets from state leaders who are more sensitive to international issues, especially gender equality issues, the rest are more concerned about domestic politics and conveying their ideas to the international realm. In addition, while using language there are some leaders who are more formal, and there are also some of them who use language that is direct to the point and gives a message that sounds harsh. That is, the way they use Twitter shows their political, social, and cultural position in international politics.

The leaders in Urcan's research were chosen based on their rankings on the "Twiplomacy" website which was created to provide the most up-to-date assessments and rankings on digital media platform Twitter, using Twitter both in official language and in English as a determining variable while selecting the leaders. When considering all this, Prime Minister of India Narendra Modi (63 million followers), President of the Republic of Turkey Recep Tayyip Erdoğan (17 million followers), and Prime Minister of Pakistan Imran Khan (12 million followers) have the most appropriate Twitter accounts to analyze. Through his Twitter account, Prime Minister Narendra Modi tweeted were about COVID-19, for example arranging an online meeting to take precautions to stop the spread of the disease. This issue is emphasized both at the national and global levels. Modi warns and informs citizens about preventive measures from being exposed to the coronavirus, daily precautions emphasized by videos and messages. Modi also used hashtags "#IndiaFightsCorona". Modi used this hashtag after all tweets related to the Coronavirus, as well as using tweets from his connections to raise awareness about the Coronavirus.

Modi identified this process as a "partnership to fight the Coronavirus", while fighting the Coronavirus, the global issue that was emphasized was fighting hunger. In this regard, ensuring food for vulnerable people both at home and abroad is indicated as an important priority. Modi also stressed in his tweet the importance of working together during the Coronavirus pandemic. At its core, after starting to tweet about COVID-19, PM Modi's focal point has been issues relating to COVID-19. Almost all of his tweets are about Coronavirus, its impact in the home country, greetings to people who work for the country and, support for other countries, donations, meetings with other leaders on preventive measures and cooperation related to COVID -19.

On the other hand, the first tweet of the President of the Republic of Turkey, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, about COVID-19 was made on March 11. It was followed by a video conference which displays the President of France, Emmanuel Macron, the Chancellor of Germany Angela Merkel, and the Prime Minister of United Kingdom (UK) Boris Johnson discussing the pandemic published on March 17. Endorgan's tweets are considered to express religious aspects and Erdogan keeps netizens updated about the progress of its local vaccine *Turkovac* that will launch soon. Pakistani Prime Minister Imran Khan tweeted on February 12 that he extended his support for China in these difficult times facing the Coronavirus. On March 20, he recalled his promise to support Afghanistan even during the global pandemic.

Schecter (2020) reported that China has issued 90,000 tweets (although some of these tweets are disinformation and conspiracy theories) since early April from 200 diplomatic particularly Lijian Zhao (973,7K followers) and state-run media accounts as part of its digital diplomacy offensive related to COVID-19, according to data compiled by the Hamilton 2.0 dashboard of the Alliance for Securing Democracy, a tool that compiles accounts linked to Chinese government, nevertheless none of the Chinese representatives on Twitter are in the social rankings based on Twiplomacy website. In the studies above we can conclude that the use of Twitter by the leaders of countries that have a high number of followers. It can be seen that Twitter plays a very important role in diplomacy that has a positive impact, namely providing information regarding steps to prevent the Coronavirus in the hope that state leaders can share information about important measure to prevent exposure to COVID-19 and be able to immediately resolve cases of COVID-19 pandemic, as well as state leaders can also abuse Twitter by spreading disinformation and conspiracy theories.

3. China's Turn to Twitter

Kinetz (2021) stressed that China used to have almost no diplomatic presence on Twitter. A number of accounts, many representing distant diplomatic posts, operate without clear coordination or direction from Beijing. Today, the work of Chinese diplomats on Twitter looks very different: more than 170 of them bicker with Western powers, promote conspiracies about the coronavirus, and demonize Americans about race issues. The quadrupling in the past year and a half of China's diplomatic presence on sites blocked in China shows that turning to Western platforms to influence the information environment beyond China's borders is no longer an afterthought but a priority.

Before appearing more proactive on Twitter, China used Weibo (and the latest WeChat), their country's own Chinese microblogging standard, which has been used by individuals and governments and institutions. On the one hand, Chinese individuals use micro-blogging to express opinions on international issues and relations, on the other hand, the government as well as foreign institutions such as embassies abroad have opened micro-blogs to interact with the public, with the aim of conveying their better diplomatic policies, spread diplomatic knowledge and resolve diplomatic and foreign problems. A turn to Western social media comes as China is waging a war on achieving "good influence" on the internet, which President Xi Jinping has called the "main battlefield" for public opinion. Alden and Chan (2021) explained that Twitter has become China's "channel of choice" for digital diplomacy, providing a tool for quick and targeted replies that will soon reach a worldwide audience. China has used Twitter as a venue to send out quick, targeted rebuttals in real time to a worldwide audience. As such,

Twitter's diplomacy has given China some much-needed breathing space. Many analysts see this strategy as China's "new weapon" in foreign policy, one that is "very effective" and employs techniques devised by state-owned think tanks to improve "China's ability to shape public opinion." Despite having some form of presence on Twitter, China is considered as a newbie in using Twitter as a platform for diplomacy ("Twiplomacy") with the official Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs account (@MFA_China) joining recently in 2018. (Wong, 2021) reported that according to an examination of court records and a Wall Street Journal report, Twitter has emerged as a propaganda battleground for China as it seeks to strengthen its global image and influence. China has been promoting its narrative on Twitter through a thriving network of diplomatic accounts and state media, although during this time of the pandemic some Chinese representatives are incessantly using Twitter to frequently post controversial tweets, Twitter is still blocked in their country. In fact, Chinese authorities have sentenced more than 50 people to prison in the past three years for using Twitter and other foreign platforms, as those social media platforms are all blocked in China, allegedly for disrupting public order and attacking party rules.

3.1 Chinese Twiplomacy during COVID-19

Nakashima et al. (2020) explain that in the early stages of the pandemic, this strategy focused on suppressing the narrative within China. According to James Mulvenon, director of intelligence integration at US defense contractor SOS International, China is so obsessed with their image that anyone who criticizes them from abroad will be met with a thermonuclear attack. The negative image and narrative formed within China culminated in the case of the death of Doctor Li Wenliang on February 7, 2020, Li Wenliang was a whistle-blower, one of a group of doctors in Wuhan who posted warnings on social media about the spread of the Coronavirus in December 2019, instead of being given an award, for having warned about a possible outbreak of the new Coronavirus, the late doctor Li was instead punished by the Wuhan Police.

Iswara (2020) reported the death case spread widely throughout the country, which eventually led to China being accused by several countries of trying to cover up the existence of the Coronavirus outbreak. Janckowicz and Collis (2020) mentioned that the Chinese diplomats quickly increased their use of Western social media platforms throughout 2019 but accelerated these efforts in early 2020, including the Ministry of Foreign Affairs launching official Twitter accounts in late 2019. Bhaya (2020) reported that the Chinese Foreign Ministry Spokesman Geng Shuang at a press conference in Beijing, when she was asked about the purpose of the presence of Chinese diplomats on Twitter, Shuang said that the presence of Chinese diplomats is the same as diplomatic posts and diplomats of other countries, the presence of Chinese diplomats on social media platforms abroad like Twitter aims to do a better job of telling the story of China, with its realities and policies to the world.

Ward (2020) interview Jessica Brandt, Head of Research and Policy at the Alliance to Secure Democracy and a Senior Fellow at the German Marshall Fund, explain that China's use of Twitter as a new tool for diplomacy is considered as using Russian guidelines to achieve its goals, there are many aspects of the Russian playbook, but also some a unique aspect of China's strategy, where Russia is notorious for undercutting democracy and undermining its attractiveness. It has a proven track record of rightly highlighting the strengths of alternative models, it appeals to China. China is now doing the same by amplifying the voices of influencers motivated by pro-Beijing and anti-Western worldviews to push narratives against US foreign policy. China is also dabbling in "whataboutism."¹

3.2 Diplomats as "Wolf-warriors"

The spread of COVID-19 to countries other than China rapidly caused China to receive negative narration from several countries, especially on social media Twitter, which is now making China actively try to counter this criticism. Palmer (2021) examine that this response is called "Wolf-Warriors" diplomacy. Named after the popular Chinese nationalistic film, "Wolf-Warriors" is a government official diplomat whose duties extend beyond the traditional diplomatic function of closed-door negotiations to the ruthless world of Twitter, also for his tendency to call and aggressively countered criticism. Schechter (2020) mentioned that Bret Schafer, a digital disinformation partner at the Washington, D.C., alliance, has been tracking China's increase in social media output for months. According to Schafer's analysis, Twitter output from China's official website has almost doubled since January, and the number of diplomatic Twitter accounts has tripled, to 135, up from just 40 last year. Many tweets are in English or Mandarin, but diplomatic accounts are often in the language of each embassy's host country.

¹ Whataboutism is a tactic that draws attention away from any wrongdoing the person being questioned may be accused of by implying that nobody's without fault, and therefore, it leaves the individual off the hook. #

Paul Gregoire and Ugur Nedim, 12 February 2019, 'Whataboutism : Avoiding Topics by Raising Irrelevant Ones', *Sydney Criminal Lawyers*, <https://www.sydneycriminallawyers.com.au/blog/whataboutism-avoiding-topics-by-raising-irrelevant-ones/> (accessed 14 June 2021).

Brandt and Schafer (2020) suggest that Chinese diplomats have also shown an understanding that Twitter's involvement was driven by provocation, not diplomacy. Nearly all of those most engaged with tweets from Chinese embassies and representatives over the past six months featured confrontational or conspiratorial content, and their most followed accounts were the most aggressive. In recent times, Chinese officials have tweeted several times alleging that the US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention cover up the information about COVID-19. At the same time, US politicians have speculated that the Chinese Communist Party is deliberately not disclosing the true number of those infected by COVID-19. The Twitter accounts of Chinese representatives, such as Zhao Lijian and Chinese Foreign Ministry spokeswoman Hua Chunying, are actively using Twitter. The diplomat, Zhao Lijian, has even gained a reputation as a Twitter maverick after he frequently confronts Trump and other US officials on the platform. Zhao is considered to be less restrained, discreet, and cautious than expected of Chinese officials who speak in public or post things on social media.

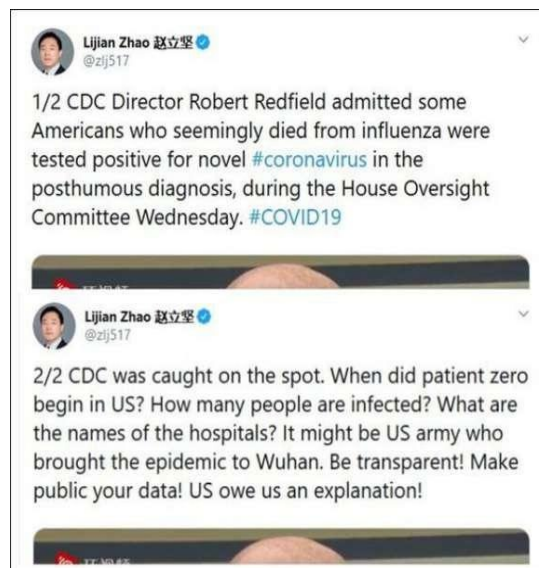


Figure 2. Screenshot of Lijian Zhao' tweet #1 (Source: *People's Daily Online*)

Figure 2 displays that Zhao has been seen posting tweets more than once claiming that the United States is the origin of the Coronavirus. The diplomat, Zhao Lijian, has even gained a reputation as a Twitter maverick after he frequently confronts Trump and other US officials on the platform. Zhao is considered to be less restrained, discreet, and cautious than expected of Chinese officials who speak in public or post things on social media.



Figure 3. Screenshot of Lijian Zhao' tweet #2 (Source: *People's Daily Online*)

Figure 3 shows that The Foreign Ministry spokesman Zhao Lijian took to Twitter to promote the disinformation that the coronavirus may have originated in a biological weapons lab in Fort Detrick, Maryland, citing a deleted post on a website identified by the State Department. The United States as a proxy site connected to the Kremlin. Chinese state media and accounts have since posted more than a hundred times about Fort Detrick's conspiracy.

Schechter (2020) stated that China has deployed state-backed diplomatic and media accounts to help bolster these theories. More than a dozen Chinese diplomats and embassies retweeted Zhao Lijian's original conspiracy tweet, and Chinese embassies from Jordan to France tweeted their own Fort Detrick conspiracy narrative that appeared to be a coordinated operation. Chinese state media is reinforcing this effort through its English-language website and Twitter account.

China Daily, for example, retweeted one of its opinion writers comparing the alleged concealment of the "real" origin of the coronavirus at Fort Detrick with those in Chernobyl and Fukushima. The Fort Detrick conspiracy theory is just one example of the new, aggressive way China is countering the COVID-19 propaganda war. Official government accounts have flooded social media with messages and images touting the COVID-19-related aid China sends around the world. Xinhua, the official state-run news agency, puts out a steady stream of COVID-19-related content on Twitter, and on April 30 it posted a two-minute video titled "Once Upon a Virus" mocking the U.S. response to COVID-19 and hailing China's. It has been retweeted almost 26,000 times and liked 50,000 times. This may be done as a form of retaliation for China from the US accusation that China is the source of the Corona outbreak. Recently Zhao's followers highly increased to 973.7K followers on Twitter, more than any other official Chinese Twitter account, (Alden and Chan, 2021, p.6) stated Zhao now serves as the official spokesperson for MFA China, an indication that his superiors in Beijing are aware of the impact Twitter has as a platform on its international side, thus enabling China to monitor and gauge public opinion internationally, as well as allowing China to broadcast its "good story" to the world.



Figure 4. Screenshot of Hua Chunying's tweet #1 (Source: *China Global Television Network Online*)

From the first figure of Hua Chunying's tweet, it can be seen that she is the same as Lijian Zhao who was aggressive in responding to accusations made by Mike Pompeo, the former US Secretary of State. (CGTN, 2020) reported that Chunying claimed the two US experts were in China on a joint WHO-China mission at the end of January, and asked Mike Pompeo to directly ask the two US experts to find out when the virus first appeared in the US.

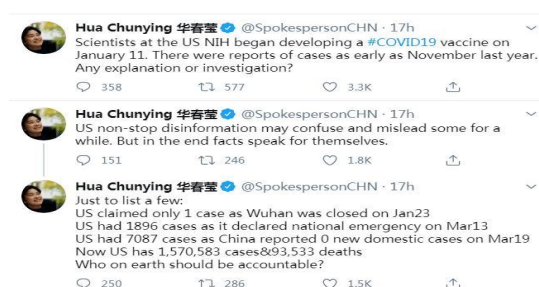


Figure 5. Screenshot of Hua Chunying's tweet #2 (Source: *China Global Television Network Online*)

In the figure 5, Hua Chunying posted a negative theory that the US might be the country that should be responsible for this Coronavirus outbreak, because the US has more than one million cases, and the death cases have reached more than ninety thousand cases, which the US has the most Corona cases exceed China. Wallis (2020) explain that aside from posting a response to counter negative narratives accusing China of being the source of the outbreak and trying to cover up the emergence of the new Coronavirus boldly and aggressively, Chinese diplomats and state media have also used Twitter to praise its donations of medical supplies overseas, knowing that China has sending medical supplies to countries fighting the pandemic, this action has taken place since early March where the COVID-19 outbreak has shifted from China to the rest of the world, especially to the United States and Europe, this shows that China is seeking to boost its image as a responsible global leader, (Wong, 2020) stated as well as the two most famous Chinese diplomats among others Zhao and Hua also similarly tweeted video footage claiming to depict Italians shouting support for China (in response to medical assistance).

Brandt and Schafer (2020) The “attack” from the two Chinese representative accounts is considered as a new approach. This more aggressive approach seems to be paying off. China's diplomatic accounts on Twitter have nearly doubled their total following since March 2020, when they started a more antagonistic coronavirus message and China's two most-followed government officials, Foreign Ministry spokesperson Zhao Lijian (@zlj517) and Hua Chunying (@spokespersonCHN), have seen follower increases of 42% and 121% respectively since March 2020. This indicates rapid follower growth extraordinary. A paper published by the Prague-based International Affairs Association (AM) explain that this Chinese diplomat's 'attack' on social media was the product of explicit instructions from above and a bottom-up initiative to impress superiors within China's party-state apparatus, for instance Zhao Lijian is the prototype of the current presence of Chinese politicians and institutions on Twitter and the model for "Wolf-Warriors" diplomacy. Palmer (2021) mentioned that Zhao's promotion to the position of spokesman for the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, after publicly voicing his opinion that the PRC should use Twitter and social media as "weapons to combat negative narratives," could be interpreted as support for its methods and narratives. He also remains one of the most mentioned people on Chinese embassy profiles to European countries. Kinetz (2021) argues that everything that Chinese diplomats do on Twitter seems to have been known and approved by President Xi, where in September 2019, when Chinese diplomats turned to Twitter, Xi gave another speech, urging party cadres to strengthen their "fighting spirit".

3.3 Another Avenue for Propaganda

Based on contemporary mass media reports, several previous studies and also supported by articles and news, this study uses the example of Chinese government propaganda that uses Twitter as a platform to counter negative narratives during COVID-19. The current study argues that the Chinese government highly considers social media platforms as a tool to advance its message online to a wider audience. Schliebs et al. (2021) mention that the study conducted a seven-month investigation that found that China's rise on Twitter was supported by an army of fake fans and accounts or bot (accounts that intentionally run automatically and others that execute commands when receiving certain input). A Carnegie Mellon University study published in May also suggested that nearly half of the Twitter accounts sharing coronavirus tweets were likely bots. (Yu, 2020) mention The AP and Oxford Internet Institute identified 26,879 accounts that managed to retweet Chinese diplomats or state media nearly 200,000 times before being suspended. Twitter has suspended more than 23,000 pro-China accounts that were secretly spreading propaganda to counter criticism of Beijing's handling of the coronavirus outbreak that has grown into a global pandemic.

According to Stanford researchers, tweeting activity about COVID-19 from Chinese bots increased in late January this year and grew more in late March. Pro-China propaganda has seen a dramatic rise with at least 105,000 fake Chinese accounts running coordinated propaganda. Even worse, there were 7000 fake Twitter accounts linked to diplomats including a Chinese foreign ministry spokesman. Kinetz (2021) asserts that Western media reports citing unnamed intelligence officials, most of the tweets are done during business hours in China whereas it is well known that Twitter is banned in China (as well as Facebook) but the majority are claimed to be based on the mainland. Furthermore, Anne-Marie Brady, a professor at the University of Canterbury in New Zealand and an expert in Chinese propaganda, said people may not realize that the information they receive has been partially framed by the ruling Chinese Communist Party. China has used Western social media as a tool to carry out its propaganda, this has helped to reshape the perception of China, although it may not directly create a positive image of China but creates the impression of desperation that China can do anything to our democracy. The pro-China account which was later suspended by Twitter is active in a number of languages, with profile descriptions in English, Chinese, Spanish, Arabic, Hindi, Italian, French, Russian, Korean, Urdu, Portuguese, Thai, Swedish, Japanese, Turkish, German. and Tamils

Wang et al. (2020) examine after Zhao tweeted when he posted a negative theory alleging that the US the virus may have originated in the US and may have leaked from Fort Detrick, suddenly a wave of #USAVirus started

spreading on Twitter. This hashtag attracts special attention for three reasons. First, the hashtag directly echoes Zhao's conspiracy theory, alluding to possible coordination. Second, the #USAVirus is literally a direct accusation to the obvious target, namely the United States. Compared to other forms of propaganda, who will gain or lose with this hashtag is relatively clear. Third, many of the #USAVirus tweets were listed in Twitter's takedown archive on June 12, which includes China-related information operations. Upon further investigation, researchers noticed that these #USAVirus tweets had similar features and used the same informational tactics: in addition to hashtags and English text of the tweet, many of these tweets were accompanied by images of text consisting of essays in simplified Chinese. This hashtag appeared in conjunction with other disinformation campaigns, for example, the US military bringing the COVID-19 virus to China, to form a new narrative that strengthens nationalism among overseas Chinese and climbers of the Great Firewall to defend the Chinese government against negative narrative attacks, and discontent. on the outbreak and spread of COVID-19. Researchers also noticed that these accounts had identical behavioural patterns: few followers and followings, low account activity, and suspicious profiles (usually images of teenage heads or manga characters).

About three-quarters of the #USAVirus tweets come along with simplified Chinese text-images that spread narratives in favor of the CCP. The temporal pattern of these tweets, between 8 a.m. and 5 p.m. by Chinese standards, suggests they were paid for by cyber soldiers or government employees located in China. The low level of engagement between these accounts further implies that they are logging into Twitter just to spread propaganda. Although China is a newbie, the Chinese government has developed the spread of propaganda tactics through coordinated disinformation and bot accounts only to create the illusion of popular support. Chen and Molter (2020) examine China's narrative of donations and deliveries of masks, personal protective equipment (PPE), and other medical resources. The researchers gathered a database of official Chinese state media sources' tweets including the terms "donations," "donations," "PPE," "equipment," and/or "masks." Between January 18, 2020, when this account recognized the first incidence of COVID-related tweets, until May 30, 2020, this data collection includes 3,144 tweets from 11 English-language Chinese media outlets. This shows that China aimed at dispelling its portrayal as the source of the coronavirus by describing itself as a responsible and kind global leader in times of crisis.

Kao and Li (2020) argue many fake Twitter accounts and accounts hijacked by China. There are several examples of accounts sharing information with ProPublica that their accounts were hacked by China, suddenly their accounts posted Chinese-language tweets, the first example is Kalen Keegan, a student at the University of Nebraska Omaha, his account continues to post non-stop in Mandarin, at first the tweet contained Hong Kong protests, but now the content changed and follow the trend, turning the discussion into the outbreak of COVID-19 pandemic. About a month later, his Twitter profile began to change, Kalen's profile photo was changed to a public photo of two people kissing. By the end of the week, his Twitter transformation was complete. @Kalenkayyy is now a zombie account spreading Chinese propaganda belonging to someone supposedly named Kalun Tang. The next example is the hacked accounts of users from around the world, who are now posting propaganda and disinformation about the coronavirus outbreak, the Hong Kong protests and other topics of national interest. They include a professor in North Carolina; a graphic artist and a mother in Massachusetts; a web designer in the UK; and a business analyst in Australia.

According to information obtained by ProPublica, some Chinese influencers were even offered cash by individuals believed to be one of the Chinese Governments to post something profitable for China. ProPublica's investigation continued until it was discovered that a group of interrelated accounts in our data linked to OneSight (Beijing) Technology Ltd., a Beijing-based internet marketing company. OneSight, according to records, entered into a contract to increase the Twitter followers of China News Service, the country's second-largest state-owned news agency. The news service operates under the United Front Work Department, a branch of the Chinese Communist Party that has long been in charge of influence operations in foreign countries. The evidence linking influence networks to OneSight, a Beijing-based internet marketing company linked to the Chinese government, is circumstantial. In 2019, several additional fake accounts were identified and promoted OneSight's own social media marketing posts with likes. Data released by Twitter in September 2019 also includes a number of posts linked to the OneSight Twitter account.

Last year, ProPublica acquired a copy of the 1,244,880 renminbi (approximately \$175,000) contract won by OneSight to increase Twitter followers from the China News Service. On January 29, six days after China's central government imposed a lockdown on Wuhan, all networks suddenly shifted their focus to the coronavirus epidemic. On the same day, OneSight announced a new app that tracks virus-related information. The announcement was accompanied by a graphic stating that OneSight would "transmit the true Chinese voice" to the world. Using data to fight the virus, the global dynamics of the new coronavirus, and conveying to the world China's true voice!" OneSight also calls itself the top overseas social marketing company in China to help them

market their brand or goods on social media that are visible outside China, examples of its big clients are leading Chinese companies such as Huawei, Alibaba, and Baidu. Moreover, ProPublica discovered that there is a tool that can be used to send messages in bulk across a number of accounts on Western social media platforms. This tool is used by China Daily's official Twitter account. During the epidemic in China, many accounts became cheerleaders for the government, calling on citizens to unite in support of efforts to fight the epidemic and urging them to “dispel online rumours”. These accounts have sought to promote the Chinese government's image overseas and shore up its domestic support. One typical recent tweet in Chinese stated: “We are not afraid during the outbreak because our country is our rear-guard. Many warriors fighting disease were pushed to the front line. Even more volunteers are helping in seemingly trivial but important ways.”

The third example is an account that has now been suspended by Twitter, namely an account named Melinda Butler, which is suspected of being a fake account that was deliberately created. The account posts about the Coronavirus, sometimes in a mixed language of simplified Chinese and traditional characters. ProPublica suspects Butler's account is fake because of many things - suspicious things, for example even though the account looks like it was created by someone named Melinda Butler, profile photo showing a middle-aged Chinese woman wearing a beige baseball cap, which this photo can be found all over the internet, ProPublica found it in a horoscope and product promotion spam account on the social networking site Weibo. Butler's account was newly created in January 2020, and does not provide any personal or biographical information, does not follow anyone on Twitter and has only one follower for its obsessive posts about the Coronavirus outbreak. During the last few weeks of research, ProPublica still got a record of the proposition that some prominent Chinese Twitter users (influencers) got an offer from a fake account. The fake account offered a sum of money aimed at users with more than 10,000 followers to promote videos of Wuhan's battle against the coronavirus "in the public interest." Another offer came from a “cultural promotion media marketing agency” account that contained a photo of Japanese actress Kasumi Arimura asking users to post a text, accompanied by a photo or video (all provided by the agency) for 400 to 2500 renminbi (approximately \$60 to \$360) per post.

Another account that calls itself an “international cultural exchange” company offers 1,700 renminbi (about \$240) per post to the Australian-Chinese artist Badiucac. This political dissident has nearly 70,000 followers on Twitter. After a day of negotiating with the company, he obtained and shared with ProPublica a sample 15-second propaganda video clip. The video is trying to show that the Chinese government has defeated the coronavirus and that everything is back on track. "This is what Chinese propagandists call a 'wave of positive energy'. Badiucac believes, based on their interactions, that the company he communicates with, works for the Chinese government. Badiucac speculated that the company used social media monitoring tools to identify their targets (evidence shows they reached out to Chinese-speaking Twitter users who have more than 10,000 followers). China's efforts that ProPublica has discovered appear to be aimed at a different audience overseas. Most of the posts found are in Chinese and appear to be aimed at influencing the millions of overseas Chinese, as well as to shape and control international public opinion. Some studies have supported that in carrying out its propaganda on Twitter, China attempts to use fake and suspicious accounts to boost its diplomats Twitter activities whether to like every post issued by a Chinese party account or retweet the posts (Carnegie Mellon University study, 2020; Stanford Internet Observatory study, 2020; Anne-Marie Brady, 2020; Wang, et al., 2020; Kao and Li, 2020). Although of China's presence, especially its “Wolf-Warriors” has been more proactive in past one half years, especially during the COVID-19 pandemic, China's influence on Twitter is still less than the other of world leaders, particularly in Asia, for example Foreign Minister of Philippines Teddy Locsin Jr, who is in the first place on the social rankings of “The 50 Most Active World Leaders”, and PM Narendra Modi's India account which is in the top two of “the 50 Most Followed Leaders” after Donald Trump.

4. Conclusion

This paper has demonstrated that COVID-19 pandemic undoubtedly makes China do everything possible to counter the accusations that they are the source of the outbreak and try to rebuild its positive image. It started conducting a digital diplomacy offensive on Twitter that has become China's ‘channel of choice’ for digital diplomacy and was previously known not proactive in using Twitter. The involvement of the Chinese government in social media Twitter shows that digital diplomacy can make a real contribution to crisis management, both in the form of disseminating information to the public and in supporting communication between countries. The current pandemic has emphasized the importance of digital diplomacy skills in efforts to deal with crises, especially through Twitter which ultimately forces every state leader or representative to adapt to current development. Chinese's aggressive tweets showed up when it comes to replying all the negative narratives on Twitter, that well carried out by its “Wolf-Warriors”. Which from the previous studies China used bot accounts to create popular illusion and to boost their persona online, hacked some Twitter accounts, created a fake account, even China offered cash to influencers worldwide that speaks in Chinese to post something profitable. Moreover,

China's Twiplomacy emphasizes that in the current digital era, social media can be used as a tool clear up misunderstandings, but it can also be used to spread disinformation.

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