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Panel III: The Chinese Communist Party's Approach to Influence and Interference

What you need to know: Beijing's global messaging apparatus is not as mature as its domestic information control toolkit. Official PRC global messaging is largely risk averse, as political pressure inside the PRC disincentivizes diplomats and state media outlets from messaging early or provocatively in response to world events, including US actions. This creates space for US messengers to spread US-aligned narratives in the information space while Chinese bureaucrats await official guidance.

What the data shows: Based on a review of online content and narrative manipulation from PRC officials, state media, and inauthentic pro-PRC accounts in the Chinese and global information environments between 2020–2023, M3 found that:

- ❖ *Insight 1:* The PRC likely does more messaging about its soft power than any other single topic. Almost 30% of PRC tweets promoted a positive image of China using cultural content instead of promoting China's political system and development model.
- ❖ *Insight 2:* US-related PRC tweets made up almost 10% of PRC tweets, making the US the most frequently mentioned country in PRC propaganda besides China itself. About half of the posts mentioning the US show the US in a negative light.
- ❖ *Insight 3:* In China's domestic information environment, controlling narratives around China's internal affairs is top priority. As new domestic events emerge and dominate the government's attention, propaganda related to international affairs—including anti-US propaganda—drops.
- ❖ *Insight 4:* PRC accounts adjust their messaging priorities by country based on Beijing's regional interests.
- ❖ *Insight 5:* The PRC's responses to current events can be slow and influenced by the PRC's internal politics, indicating gaps in their global messaging apparatus.
- ❖ *Insight 6:* Inauthentic, pro-PRC accounts complement official PRC messaging by furthering its reach and creating original content too incendiary for official accounts, likely because official accounts fear pushback from other nations or repercussions to their diplomatic careers.

- ❖ *Insight 7:* The PRC amplifies Russian narratives that serve the PRC's interests, in particular aligning on anti-US narratives, but does not align all its content with Moscow.

What we recommend: As the PRC looks to continue maturing its global propaganda apparatus and expand its influence in online environments outside of China, it is vital to support, combine, and share the data collected across the US government to monitor, evaluate, and disrupt China's information influence efforts. Therefore, we recommend that Congress consider:

- ❖ Ensuring that all elements of the US Government involved in collecting and analyzing data related to PRC efforts to manipulate the information environment—and of course countering those manipulation efforts—are fully resourced to engage in this profoundly dynamic and increasingly technical contest. This work is currently being engaged in by the Pentagon, Department of State, and the US Agency for Global Media, to name a few.
- ❖ Empowering USG messengers tasked with countering the PRC's online manipulation efforts to be able to message quickly and truthfully. The messengers that communicate narratives about US policy and intention should do so in a manner that reflects our commitment to democratic values, human rights, self-determination, and the dignity of all people.

Background on Two Six Technology's Media Manipulation Monitor (M3) Insights and

Data: Two Six Technology's M3 tracks Chinese government manipulation—such as censorship, propaganda, and inauthentic amplification—of traditional and social media, as well as other types of data. Our system provides a unique quantitative look at the PRC's objectives, sensitivities, and vulnerabilities, which we uncover as we monitor what information it seeks to control, silence, and spread online—at home and abroad.

Insight 1: Beijing sought to make China “lovable”¹ and prioritized promoting cultural content on Twitter to improve its image.

In the past year, the PRC prioritized positive portrayals of China to counter perceived bad publicity in the global information environment. PRC messaging on Twitter worked towards Beijing's goal of “telling China's story well.”² Xi introduced this messaging strategy in 2013 to counter perceived negative portrayals of China with human interest pieces about Chinese culture instead of with propaganda about China's governance or economic models.

- ❖ **Official and inauthentic Twitter accounts promote soft power content.** About 30% of content authored by official PRC Twitter accounts and 25% of content by inauthentic, pro-PRC Twitter accounts includes positive portrayals of China. *Figures 1 and 2*

¹ NBC News, <https://www.nbcnews.com/news/world/xi-wants-make-china-more-lovable-around-world-he-may-n1269458>

² China Media Project, https://chinamediaproject.org/the_ccp_dictionary/telling-chinas-story-well/

- ❖ PRC accounts use human interest pieces to attract netizen attention and bring to life positive portrayals of China. Of the 28 “positive portrayal of China” posts identified in a random sample of official PRC posts, 15 included photos of Chinese scenery and food or features about Chinese history and culture. *Figure 1*

Insight 2: Official and pro-Beijing accounts pushed anti-US propaganda on Twitter to portray the US as a global destabilizer.

On Twitter, PRC-affiliated accounts portrayed the US as having escalated the Ukraine-Russia war, interfered with China’s domestic affairs, and provoked conflicts around the world. It also highlighted US domestic issues such as gun violence and border control. Between March 2022–February 2023:

- ❖ PRC-affiliated accounts authored more than 91,500 posts that mentioned the US. Over half of these portrayed the US negatively, according to a random sample.
- ❖ The US-related tweets garnering the most engagement claimed that the US profited from provoking wars, bullied other countries into serving American interests, and lacked protection for abortion rights. *Figures 3 & 4*
- ❖ M3 has detected PRC-affiliated Twitter accounts pushing anti-US narratives on more than 10 topics since January 2023. The highest post-volume campaigns M3 detected covered topics including:
 - **Ohio train derailment**
 - **US support for Japanese defense**
 - **Brazil insurrection**
 - **Nord Stream Pipeline explosion**

PRC accounts on Twitter, including both officially affiliated and inauthentic, pro-Beijing accounts, do not frequently discuss democracy in direct terms, instead relying on negative portrayals of the US and its allies to undermine US influence globally.

- ❖ **PRC and pro-PRC accounts did not frequently discuss democracy, instead relying on criticism of the US and its allies to undermine a US-lead liberal world order.** Less than one percent of posts by official PRC accounts and inauthentic, pro-PRC accounts mentioned the word “democracy” in at least one of six languages in the past six months (*Figure 2*).

Insight 3: In China's domestic information environment, controlling narratives around China's internal affairs is top priority.

Beijing's suite of nationalist messaging tools, including propaganda about the US and Japan, decreased when netizen discussion about—and censorship of—domestic issues increased.

- ❖ **Nationalism on Weibo rose when discussions of COVID decreased, and dropped when COVID discussions increased (*Figure 5*).**
- ❖ **Anti-US content fell as Beijing worked to control conversations about COVID policies, lockdowns, and outbreaks.**
 - M3 detected statistically significant drops in anti-US rhetoric in government propaganda on Weibo during the COVID lockdowns beginning in Shanghai in March 2022 and Wuhan in January 2020—China's most well-known lockdown periods due to their size, duration, and negative effect on the economy.
 - Anti-US sentiment expressed in PRC propaganda on Weibo peaked in March–July 2020 after China's initial COVID cases had subsided, Wuhan's lockdown lifted, and Beijing began to portray the US as incompetent at managing the pandemic (*Figure 6*).

Insight 4: Chinese propagandists tailored Twitter messaging by region, with a greater focus on Beijing's infrastructure projects in Oceania, Latin America, Sub-Saharan Africa, and South and Central Asia.

M3 analyzed PRC-affiliated accounts' activities on Twitter in the past year (March 2022 to February 2023) and found that **Chinese propagandists likely tailored their messages by regions to serve Beijing's interests**: A higher percentage of PRC tweets targeting audiences in East and Southeast Asia as well as in the Middle East and North Africa focused on US-related content, whereas PRC messaging in Australia and Oceania, Latin America and the Caribbean, Sub-Saharan Africa, and South and Central Asia focused on PRC infrastructure and investment (*Figure 7*).

In our analysis, we assessed data from more than 400 Twitter accounts associated with the Chinese government and compared the number of tweets they authored on seven of the topics that M3 identified as likely Beijing's messaging priorities. Between March 2022–February 2023:

- ❖ PRC-affiliated accounts' tweets discussing Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and other infrastructure projects accounted for 6.6% of the posts authored. In regions such as Latin America, sub-Saharan Africa, Australia and Oceania, and South and Central Asia, a higher percentage of PRC posts discussed infrastructure than US-related content.

Tailoring anti-US narratives for specific audiences: M3 detected anti-US narratives in a variety of languages, and the PRC sometimes tailored narratives' content for regional audiences. Among the 10 posts by PRC Twitter accounts that garnered the most engagement during March 2022–February 2023, some of the anti-US narratives included:

- ❖ **Anti-US narrative on Taiwan:** The US must not interfere with Taiwan, which is an inseparable part of China – *appeared in the top 10 most engaged-with posts among PRC Twitter accounts in North America, East and Southeast Asia, and Australia-Oceania.*
- ❖ **Anti-US narrative on military aggression:** The US is a military aggressor that has worsened the conflict in Ukraine just as it worsened the situation in the Middle East – *appeared in the top 10 most engaged-with posts among PRC Twitter accounts in Europe and the Middle East and North Africa.*
- ❖ **Anti-US narrative on lying about China:** The US spreads lies about China, and Western media cannot be trusted, such as regarding human rights violations in Xinjiang – *appeared in the top 10 most engaged-with posts among PRC Twitter accounts in South and Central Asia.*

Insight 5: The PRC's responses to current events can be slow and influenced by the PRC's internal politics, indicating gaps in their global messaging apparatus.

The PRC's recent government transition from the 19th to 20th Party Congresses between October 2022–March 2023 likely caused a propaganda lull on Weibo and Twitter as propagandists awaited new orders and avoided messaging that might not adhere to any potential new guidelines (*Figure 8*). During that time, M3 tracked several instances of delayed PRC responses to global events. The delayed responses are not necessarily a result of the government transition and it is possible that they would have occurred during non-transition times.

- ❖ M3 reviewed seven indicators of PRC messaging on Weibo and Twitter and found all seven indicators that were previously decreasing are increasing as of 14 March 2023 and on-track to exceed the October–February lull by the end of March.
- ❖ During the propaganda lull, M3 captured at least three instances of missing or delayed PRC responses to global events:

- PRC Twitter accounts authored only one post in response to charged remarks by a US Representative on 28 February, who accused the Argentine government of making a “pact with the devil” in its cooperation with Beijing.³
- PRC Twitter accounts authored eight posts responding to a 20 January *The Wall Street Journal* investigative report⁴ on Chinese-built infrastructure projects in Ecuador and other countries. These posts occurred from 22–24 February, more than a month after the article’s publication.⁵

Insight 6: Inauthentic, pro-PRC accounts complement official PRC messaging by furthering its reach and creating original content too incendiary for official accounts.

Beijing uses inauthentic Twitter accounts to further spread its messages and sometimes to spread criticism of adversaries that might be too incendiary for official accounts to risk saying, in case of pushback from other countries. Although inauthentic accounts frequently retweet official accounts, sometimes narratives flow in the other direction, appearing first among inauthentic accounts and later adopted in Beijing’s official messaging.

- ❖ **Direct retweets of an official message:** M3 analytics determined that 10% of retweets of PRC official Twitter content are inauthentic. Twitter claims that around 5% of the platform’s total accounts are inauthentic.⁶
- ❖ **Original content furthering a narrative favorable to Beijing:** Inauthentic, pro-PRC accounts often promote content that is likely too incendiary for official accounts to promote without risking pushback from the content’s subjects—often the US or the countries harboring overseas Chinese dissidents (*Figure 9*).

Insight 7: The PRC amplifies Russian narratives that serve the PRC’s interests, in particular anti-US narratives, but does not align all its content with Moscow.

³ See M3 Report: “Argentina: PRC-affiliated accounts failed to seize an opportunity to amplify controversial remarks by US politician who disparaged Sino-Argentine cooperation, exposing gaps in Beijing’s messaging,” 10 March 2023.

⁴ Wall Street Journal, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/china-global-mega-projects-infrastructure-falling-apart-11674166180>

⁵ See M3 Report: “Ecuador: Delayed global messaging and silence from local diplomatic account mark Beijing’s response to reports of PRC infrastructure failures,” 2 March 2023.

⁶ AP News, <https://apnews.com/article/elon-musk-twitter-inc-technology-434b2c0588a6cee2fd7c9477b0bd7902>

The PRC government amplifies content from Russian media and pro-Russia narratives so long as they serve the PRC's own interests. Anti-US narratives are among the most frequent narratives that Moscow and Beijing agree on.

❖ **Aligning with Moscow on anti-US narratives:** Beijing frequently aligns with Moscow on anti-US narratives, in particular narratives that portray the US and NATO as overreaching and provoking Russia to invade Ukraine, which Beijing has also cited as a reason that it needs to defend Taiwan against US encroachment.

➤ **Aligning on Twitter:** In the past few months, Beijing has aligned its messaging with Moscow when it accused the US of blowing up the Nord Stream pipeline,⁷ promoted a video portraying the US as exploiting Latin America's natural resources,⁸ and spreading disinformation that President Joe Biden plans to destroy Taiwan.⁹

➤ **Aligning on Weibo:** In March 2022, Beijing launched a disinformation campaign in its domestic information environment (Weibo) supporting Russia's narratives about US biolab facilities in Ukraine,¹⁰ promoting this narrative because:

- It falls in line with the Chinese government's narratives that paint the US as an instigator of international conflicts;
- The campaign helps blame the current conflict between Russia and Ukraine on the US without jeopardizing Beijing's efforts to maintain neutrality; and
- Russia's claims help reinforce the conspiracies Beijing has been spreading since 2020 that US biological laboratories—such as US Army base Fort Detrick—are responsible for the COVID-19 pandemic.

❖ **Promoting anti-US disinformation while censoring Western embassies' rebuttals:** M3 analyzed the top 20 disinformation campaigns amplified by PRC government accounts on Weibo during May 2021–April 2022 and discovered the majority of these

⁷ See M3 Report: "PRC accounts renewed their accusations that the US blew up the Nord Stream pipeline, prioritizing protecting China's image as a responsible international actor," 3 March 2023.

⁸ See M3 Report: "Bolivia: The PRC seized on a Russian-origin video to portray the US as a resource exploiter, while touting the benefits of Chinese economic cooperation from a lithium extraction deal," 26 January 2023.

⁹ See M3 Report: "Taiwan: Disinformation swirled in the global information environment as PRC-affiliated accounts and pro-PRC inauthentic accounts raised the specter of cross-Strait war and revolution," 1 March 2023.

¹⁰ See M3 Report: "Disinformation War: Beijing boosts Russia's claims about US bioweapon programs in Ukraine to support its COVID-19 conspiracies," 18 March 2022.

campaigns referenced US bioweapons or biolabs, and censors hid content from Western countries' embassy accounts that sought to debunk the disinformation (*Figure 10*).¹¹

- ❖ **Not aligning with Moscow:** Beijing's official messaging on the Russia-Ukraine war aligns with Russia's in blaming the US and NATO for provoking the conflict, but differs on how the war should end. Beijing maintains that a swift and peaceful resolution is paramount, and its messaging shows that the PRC likely prioritizes improving relations with Europe over gaining advantages from working more closely with Russia against the US.

¹¹ See M3 Report: "Disinformation playbook: Beijing cycles through anti-US narratives and spreads disinformation in response to pressures at home and abroad," 6 May 2022.

Appendix: Charts and Visualizations

Figure 1

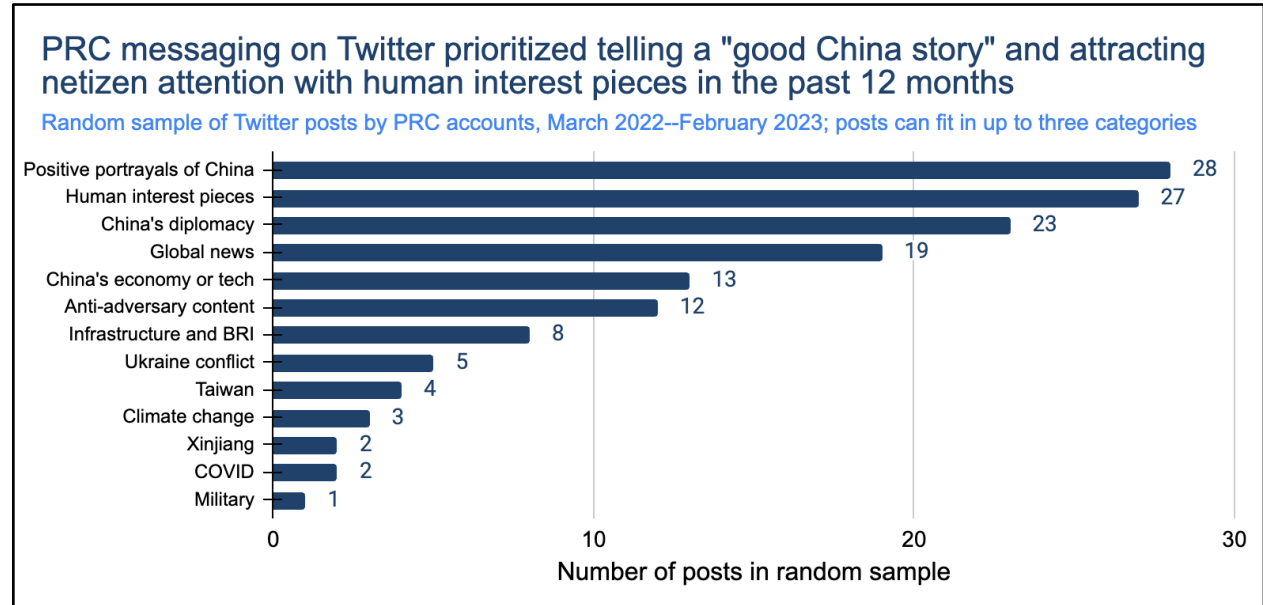
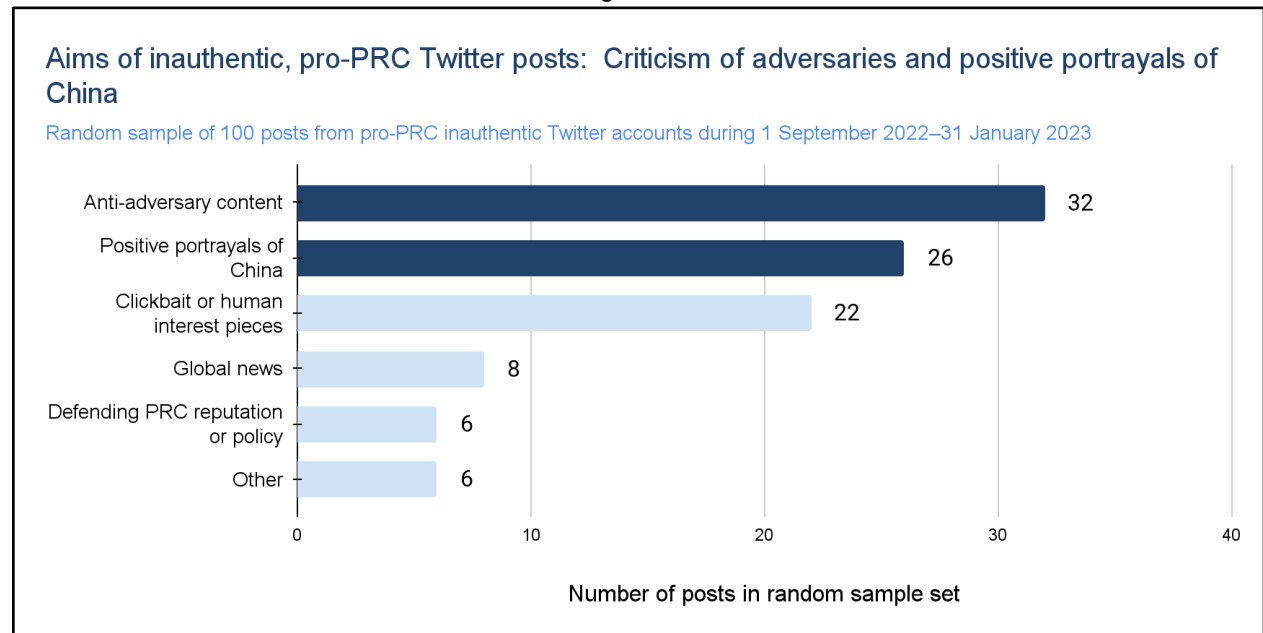


Figure 2



Figures 3 & 4: PRC Twitter accounts shared pictures claiming that the US was profiting from conflicts (left) and shared news headlines with emphasized words such as “punish” to portray the US as coercing other countries (right). Red markings are part of the original post.

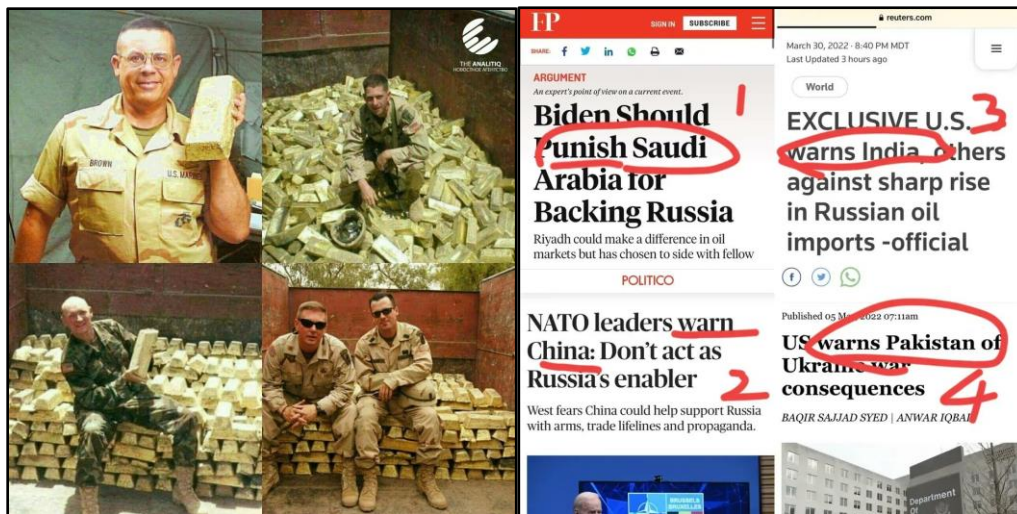


Figure 5

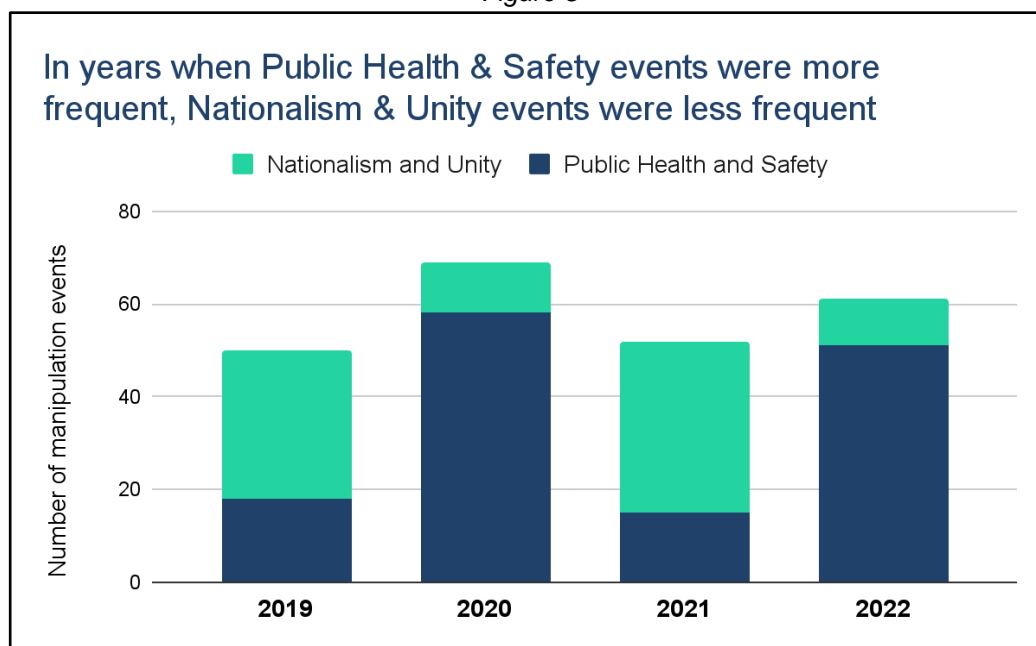


Figure 6

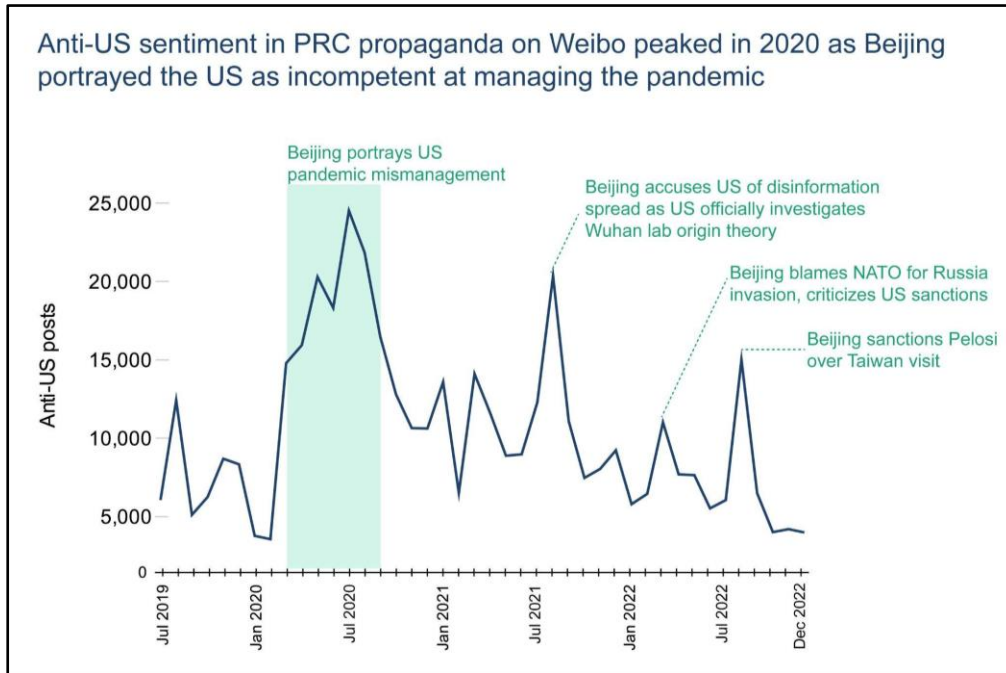
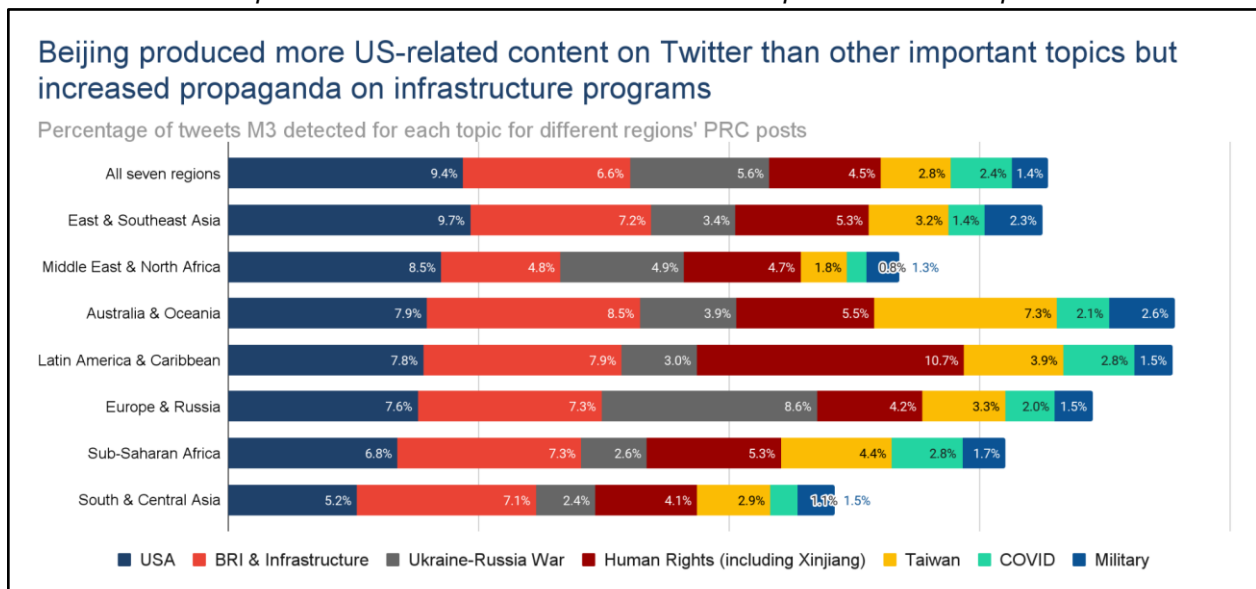


Figure 7: Note: M3 captured relevant PRC tweets for each topic with multilingual keywords to evaluate Beijing's global messaging efforts. The posts captured for each topic are not comprehensive and might overlap because PRC tweets often discussed multiple themes in one post.¹²



¹² M3 used keywords translated in 10 major languages (English, Spanish, Japanese, Arabic, Chinese, French, Portuguese, Russia) in an attempt to capture relevant data for seven themes that M3 identified as topics that are likely Beijing's messaging priorities. Please see a list of countries included at the end of this report.

Figure 8

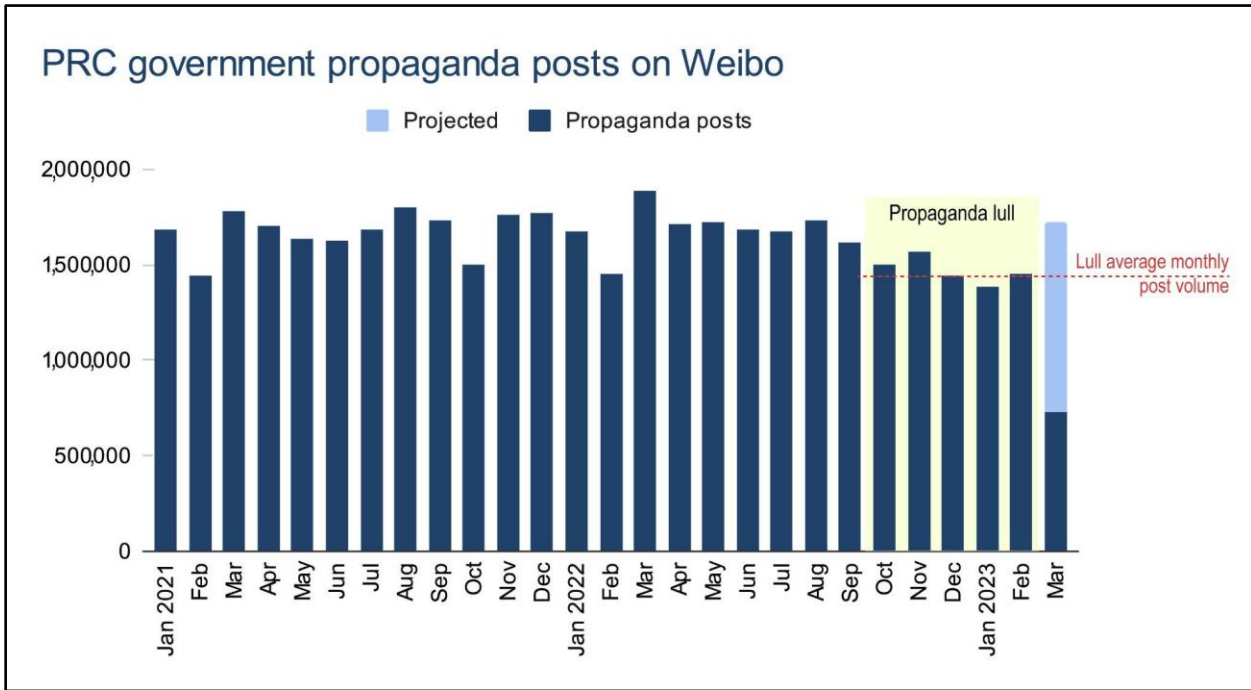


Figure 9 – Inauthentic, pro-PRC accounts often spread incendiary content criticizing PRC adversaries, including Chinese dissidents and journalists who have spoken publicly about China's persecution of Uyghurs, as illustrated in the cartoon below, shared among inauthentic, pro-PRC accounts in 2022.



Figure 10

Beijing's most amplified disinformation sought to sow doubt about COVID-19 origins and downplay the US's relationship with its allies

Government-authored posts containing disinformation on Weibo, 21 May 2021-22 Apr 2022

