

# Trigger warning

The CCP's coordinated information effort to discredit the BBC

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## Introduction

As international media and researchers expose human rights abuses in China, including allegations of systematic sexual assault in Xinjiang's internment camps, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) is hitting back with a coordinated information campaign and propaganda targeting the UK public broadcaster, the BBC. CCP diplomatic accounts, Chinese state media, pro-CCP influencers and patriotic trolls on Silicon Valley's social media networks are spreading messages and narratives that seek to undermine critical reporting by international media, research institutes and NGOs with accusations of bias and disinformation. Those same efforts also seek to smear and discredit the organisations and individuals involved in that reporting and research, for example, through promoting niche alternative Western websites that are also critical of the same institutions.

The coordinated approach to counter and undermine the BBC highlights several features of the CCP's increasingly agile propaganda and disinformation apparatus. There's clear temporal and narrative alignment across diplomatic and state media messaging as well as among pro-CCP influencers and patriotic Twitter accounts, from which we can infer a level of coordination and a willingness to target international audiences.



There are parallels with CCP disinformation efforts in other areas, with one example being around the origins of the coronavirus pandemic, where CCP officials have [propagated and supported alternative hypotheses that are without evidence](#) (such as various claims about the virus originating in the US), while seeking to confuse investigative work. In the case of Xinjiang, effort to discredit critical reporting revealing large scale CCP abuses is accompanied by continued propaganda attempting to portray Xinjiang as a peaceful and happy place full of contented Uyghur people. This control of narratives around key public issues is designed to assert the CCP's [discourse power](#).

In January and February 2021, the CCP focused its efforts on the BBC.

[The BBC's report](#) on 2 February 2021 into allegations of systematic rape in Xinjiang's internment camps and [the decision by Ofcom](#) (the British broadcasting regulator) on 4 February 2021 to withdraw the UK broadcast licence of China Global Television Network (CGTN) were among a number of triggers for a coordinated effort by the CCP's propaganda apparatus to exert discourse power that flowed across Chinese and Western social media in an effort to discredit the BBC, distract international attention and recapture control of the narrative.

Allegations of serious human rights abuses in, and beyond, Xinjiang also often highlight the increasingly sophisticated configuration of surveillance technologies deployed by the CCP to monitor and control dissent, and manage information flows to the CCP's advantage. The party views the [maintenance of domestic control](#) as fundamental to its grip on power. Furthermore, the party must contest criticism of its systems of control if it's to continue to [extend its political power and economic influence internationally](#).

While not intended to be comprehensive, this report provides a snapshot of the CCP's coordinated response targeting the BBC, which leveraged YouTube, Twitter and Facebook (all platforms unavailable to citizens in mainland China) and was broadly framed around three prominent narratives:

1. That the BBC spreads disinformation and is biased against China
2. That the BBC's domestic audiences think that it's biased and not to be trusted
3. That the BBC's reporting on China is instigated by foreign actors and intelligence agencies.

The report also analyses some of the secondary effects of this propaganda effort by exploring the mobilisation of a pro-CCP Twitter network that has previously amplified the Covid-19 disinformation content being pushed by China's Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and whose negative online engagement with the BBC peaks on the same days as that of the party-state's diplomats and state media.

## Background

The CCP is acutely aware that international scrutiny of its human rights record in Xinjiang threatens its international standing. The party is becoming increasingly willing to contest any reputational threats to its geopolitical positioning using social media platforms provided by Silicon Valley, which allow the party's diplomats, state media, pro-CCP influencers and trolls to combat 'anti-China' critiques from the international community and shape political discourse in ways conducive to its strategic goals. The CCP is clearly aware of the unique power that comes from using social media platforms in this way.

In recent years, criticism of the BBC by Chinese state officials and state media often comes after reporting that's critical of the CCP on sensitive issues, such as the treatment of Uyghurs in Xinjiang. On 22 June 2019, for example, following a BBC report on Xinjiang, current Foreign Ministry spokesperson Zhao Lijian [tweeted that the story](#) was designed 'to create differences between China and Muslim countries' and called the BBC 'the Biased Broadcasting Corp'. The use of such phrasing by Chinese diplomatic accounts [and state media](#) continues in 2021. On 4 February 2021, for example, Zhao [again tweeted](#) that the 'BBC shall not become Bad-mouthing Broadcasting Corporation' (Figure 1).

Figure 1: Some of Zhao Lijian's tweets



For the BBC, just as for other public broadcasters and outlets with considerable reach and influence, accusations of political bias and questions of media ethics are not unusual. Close scrutiny of the BBC's reporting in domestic and foreign contexts is necessary, due to the outlet's power to set narratives and agendas. Given its prominence as a global provider of news and cultural content, and its role as an exporter of British perspectives, the outlet is often a flashpoint for both domestic and international audiences. In that context, it's perhaps unsurprising to see criticism of the BBC's reporting on China, given that—like most global media outlets—it reports on topics the CCP regards as politically sensitive.

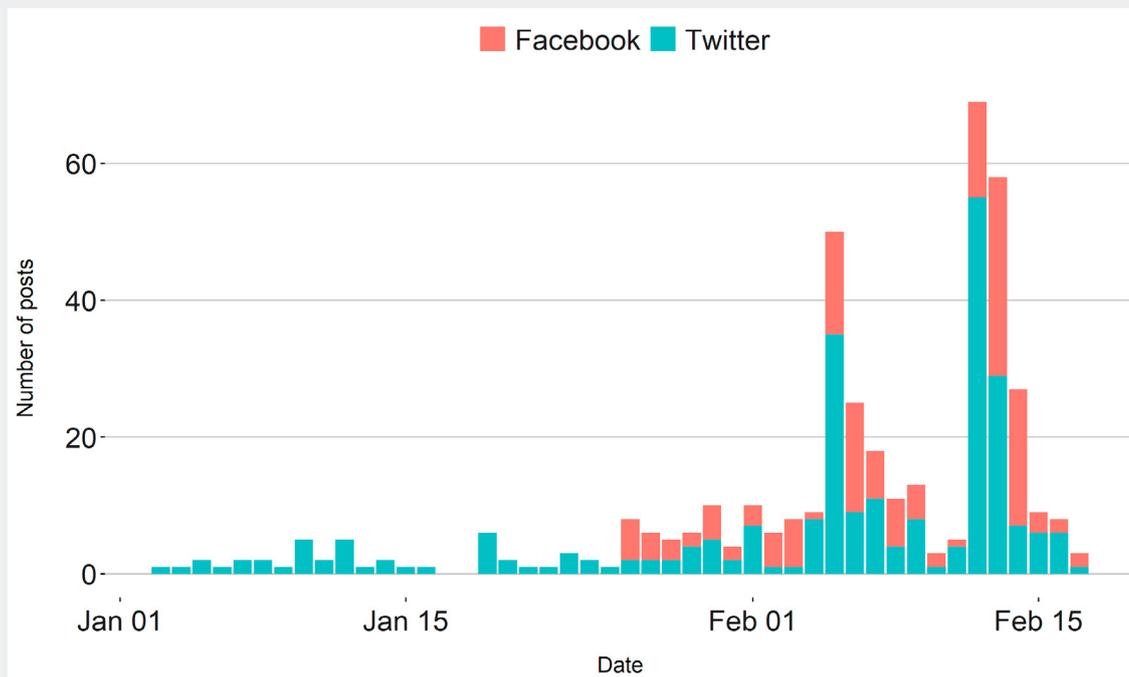
On 12 February 2021, in what was seen largely as a retaliatory response to the Ofcom decision, *BBC World News* was also banned in China. Prior to this the channel was accessible, but only in a number of hotels and in compounds for foreigners. China's National Radio and Television Administration [said that \*BBC World News\* reports about China violated broadcasting guidelines: 'the requirement that news should be truthful and fair' and not 'harm China's national interests'](#).

## Reach and potential impact

The impact and reach of these efforts to discredit the BBC are difficult to measure, and this report provides only a snapshot of related activity and narratives. ASPI analytics show that 48 Chinese diplomatic and state media Twitter accounts mentioned the BBC 253 times between 1 January and 17 February 2021. In the same period, 33 Chinese diplomatic and state media Facebook accounts mentioned the BBC 161 times, according to the CrowdTangle social media analysis tool.

Yet this report highlights the secondary effects of those efforts: mobilising posts and content shares in the thousands on both Chinese and Western social media. Chinese diplomatic and state media mentions of the BBC peaked on Facebook and Twitter on 5 February 2021 (the day after Ofcom revoked CGTN's licence to broadcast in the UK) and on 12 February 2021 (when the BBC was banned from broadcasting in China; Figure 2).

**Figure 2: Chinese diplomatic and state media posts mentioning 'BBC' on Twitter and Facebook between 1 January and 17 February 2021**



Mentions of the BBC were overwhelmingly negative and included claims that the BBC was spreading 'fake news' and that its reporting is biased (Table 1).

**Table 1: Chinese diplomatic and state media themes, by the number of posts about the BBC on Facebook and Twitter between 1 January and 17 February 2021**

Themes	Facebook posts	Twitter posts
Xinjiang	21	46
fake news	11	18
bias	15	13
content violation	12	13
disinformation	4	10
propaganda	3	9
Covid-19	6	2

## Narrative 1: The BBC spreads disinformation and is biased against China

Chinese state media have been creating social media content that suggests the BBC and other media outlets edit or manipulate footage and reporting to make false claims about Xinjiang and other topics. Those stories are often promoted by the state's diplomatic social media accounts. For example, *China Daily* has created a '#MediaUnlocked' series that accuses Western media of spreading disinformation about China and claims to expose manipulation. Between February 2020 and February 2021, clips and posts with that hashtag have received at least 99,000 interactions on Facebook, according to CrowdTangle data. CrowdTangle also shows that [some Facebook clips](#) in the series about reporting on China's coronavirus response reached more than 2 million views.

On 9 January 2021, the *China Daily* Twitter account [shared a six-minute video](#) that claimed—as a part of its #MediaUnlocked series—that the BBC had used 'editing tricks and twisted facts' in its coverage of forced labour in Xinjiang (Figure 3). The clip was also shared on the Facebook page of [China's embassy in France](#) as well as [on other diplomatic](#) and state media Facebook pages. [As reported by the Press Gazette](#), *China Daily* has paid Facebook to promote its #MediaUnlocked posts, in one case [reportedly paying less than \\$400](#) to target 1 million users 'with a video that rubbishes independent press reports from Xinjiang'.

**Figure 3: Chinese state media and diplomatic accounts sharing *China Daily* #MediaUnlocked videos**

The figure shows two social media posts. On the left is a tweet from China Daily (@ChinaDaily) dated Jan 10, 2021, at 2:19 PM. The tweet text reads: "Fact or Fiction? A recent video report released from BBC uses editing tricks and twisted facts to make false claims about forced labor, slandering a #Xinjiang factory worker in the process, a China Daily investigation uncovers. #MediaUnlocked". Below the text is a video player showing a newsroom with multiple monitors. The video has 62K views and 1,510 likes. On the right is a Facebook post from the Chinese Embassy in France, dated Jan 10, 2021, at 9:37 PM. The post text reads: "China Daily 🤔😏 Vérité ou fiction? Un récent rapport vidéo publié par la BBC utilise des astuces de montage et des faits tordus pour faire de fausses déclarations sur le travail forcé, calomniant un ouvrier de l'usine Xinjiang, révèle une enquête du China Daily. See less". Below the text is a video player with a red border and the text "western media unlocked" at the top. The video has 328 post views and 11.6K total views.

This form of ‘Western media criticism’ is also promoted by other Chinese state media outlets. Another video shared on social media in February with English subtitles provides a satire of a man ‘applying’ for a job at the BBC by depicting the various ways the broadcaster allegedly depicts the country in a negative light (Figure 4). According to the *Global Times*, the video was created by blogger Damo Uncle, who posted it on Sina Weibo. The clip was shared on 1 February 2021 by the *Global Times* on Twitter, where it’s been retweeted more than 1,500 times at the time of writing. The clip was also promoted by diplomatic accounts, including by Zhao Lijian and a current diplomat at the Chinese embassy in Lebanon, Cao Yi. The latter tweeted that ‘Cameras are invented to record the truth, but some people use them to lie. Shame on them.’ Wholly manufactured footage with no connection to any actual BBC reporting or activity is thus used as a basis for further criticism through official CCP diplomatic and state media channels.

**Figure 4: CCP-aligned accounts sharing Damo Uncle’s video**



In some cases, state media and diplomatic accounts have amplified China-focused Western social media personalities who created content on this theme. State broadcaster CGTN used YouTube to share a version of the video ‘how to make a documentary in the style of the BBC’ trope, for example, which was first published on YouTube on 7 February 2021 (Figure 5). It said the video was based on a re-edited clip about Wuhan posted to the *YChina* YouTube channel, which hosts a variety of clips by Westerners about life in China. On Facebook, CGTN’s post of the video received almost 6,000 views, according to CrowdTangle. On YouTube, it had received almost 92,000 views at the time of writing. CGTN has since shared a range of YouTube videos on that theme, including one posted on 23 February 2021 titled ‘Why is BBC making fake news against China’.

Figure 5: Screenshot of CGTN video ‘How to make a BBC style documentary about Wuhan?’



In some cases, the BBC’s filming techniques have become a flashpoint. Following the deluge of videos alleging that the BBC is ‘fake news’, users on Chinese social media noticed that the BBC had posted different versions of a video on YouTube depicting how life had changed in Wuhan due to the pandemic, with different colour appearances. On 15 February 2021, a Chinese-speaking Weibo user [posted](#) a shot-for-shot comparison of a video by the *BBC News Chinese* and the *BBC News English* YouTube channels. The screenshots showed that the English [version](#) of this footage had a ‘grey’ tinge, whereas the Chinese [version](#) had more vivid colours (Figure 6). That Weibo post received nearly 10,000 likes and more than 2,000 shares.

Figure 6: Screenshot of Weibo post taken on 18 February 2021



Chinese state-affiliated media outlets were quick to criticise the BBC based on the Weibo post’s analysis. The official *Global Times* account on the Chinese video sharing website Bilibili posted a [video](#) displaying the two BBC videos next to each other, and *Guancha*, a Chinese-language news website, [reported](#) that Chinese netizens were complaining that the BBC was using an ‘underworld’ filter to portray places and events in China as dimmer and paler than they were in reality.

On Twitter, a [person who claimed to be a producer with the BBC China team](#) explained that the original footage was shot in C-log mode, which creates greyscale footage that prevents overexposure and underexposure but requires colour grading in the editing process. The version posted on the *BBC News Chinese* account appears to have been colour corrected, whereas the English version was not.

## Narrative 2: The BBC’s domestic audience think that it’s biased and not to be trusted

Given the BBC’s cultural and political prominence in the UK, there’s considerable domestic debate about its reporting and funding from all sides of politics—themes that Chinese state officials and media have occasionally seized upon as useful vehicles for discrediting BBC reporting. This comes [as some surveys find trust in the media declining](#) in the UK overall.

On 12 February 2021, a Chinese diplomat in Lebanon, Cao Yi, [amplified the claim](#) that almost a majority of Britons believe the broadcaster is biased (Figure 7)—possibly based on a poll [published in the UK’s \*Express\* newspaper](#) on 6 February 2021, which claimed a majority of Britons in its sample of 1,700 people did not want to pay licence fees and that almost half think the BBC had ‘failed to be impartial in its news coverage’. The *Express* article was also promoted by other pro-CCP accounts, as well as by domestic critics of the broadcaster.

**Figure 7: Cao Yi tweets suggesting domestic UK audiences believe the BBC is biased**

**Tweet 1 (Feb 5, 2021):**

曹毅 CAO Yi أبو وسيم @CaoYi\_MFA

Please look at your "nicknames" in the comments:

- Biased Broadcasting Channel
- British Bullshit Company
- Bad-mouthing Broadcasting Corporation

If you still think you're "the world's most trusted int'l news broadcaster", your arrogance is astonishing.

**Tweet 2 (Feb 12, 2021):**

曹毅 CAO Yi أبو وسيم @CaoYi\_MFA

A recent poll shows more than 56% of Britons don't like to pay license fees for BBC, almost 50% of Britons believe BBC is biased reporting. Not only Chinese people are fed up with fake news and fabricated stories.

**Retweets:** 12 (Tweet 1), 9 (Tweet 2)

**Quote Tweets:** 1 (Tweet 1), 1 (Tweet 2)

**Likes:** 70 (Tweet 1), 42 (Tweet 2)

To be clear: such rhetoric and questions of bias are nothing new for the BBC, even as they also provide an avenue for CCP criticism of the broadcaster. Versions of phrases such as ‘biased broadcasting corporation’ have also been used by the BBC’s domestic critics, so the CCP is repurposing existing criticism to serve CCP ends. In 2020, for example, Facebook posts by UKIP politicians and party pages received among the most interactions of any posts using the phrase ‘biased broadcasting corporation’, according to CrowdTangle.

The claim that the BBC is generally seen as biased has also been shared on social media in February 2021 by a number of Western online influencers who are based in China—who, in turn, occasionally have their content amplified by state media. For example, Lee and Oli Barrett are a British father and son who create video blogs in China and shared criticism of the BBC a number of times in February (Figure 8). In January 2021, *The Times* alleged that the Chinese Government funded some of their content. The Barretts denied that, but did disclose taking trips paid for in part by state media within China.

On 8 February 2021, CGTN also shared a YouTube video depicting a British YouTuber who claims to live in China, 'Barrie', responding to the Ofcom ban of the broadcaster. He states that 'in truth, any thinking person in the UK doesn't trust the BBC ... suffice to say that the BBC are lying through their teeth yet again and trying to defame and libel China.' The CCP clearly sees significant value in criticism of the BBC coming from voices of UK origin, using these to amplify existing critique and negative sentiment among target English-language audiences. On 1 March 2021, Barrie, whose YouTube channel is called Best China Info, also had one of his videos shared on Twitter by Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Hua Chunying. She said the video showed 'how the "spin doctors" in western media like #BBC made and spread deliberate misrepresentation on #China, with #Xinjiang as an example'.

Figure 8: Some of the Barretts' tweets



Figure 9: Hua Chunying's tweet sharing 'Barrie's' YouTube video



### Narrative 3: The BBC's reporting on China is instigated by foreign actors and intelligence agencies

Another narrative amplified by Chinese diplomats and Chinese state media is that the BBC's reporting has been swayed by foreign actors or intelligence agencies. Again, versions of that allegation have been levelled at the BBC—as well as other media outlets—by both domestic and international critics concerning various coverage over many decades.

On 4 February 2021, [the Global Times said](#) its editor-in-chief, Hu Xijin, believed that 'foreign anti-China forces' were at work in BBC reports about the sexual assault of Uyghur women, for example. [He also said on Twitter](#) that he suspected that some of the BBC's reporting on Xinjiang and Hong Kong had been 'closely instigated by the intelligence agencies of the US and the UK' (Figure 9). [Another diplomatic account shared a link to an article](#) in a British socialist newspaper with the headline: 'BBC accused of peddling anti-China smears amid claims it is acting on behalf of "the deep state".'

Figure 10: Zhao Lijian retweeting 'foreign anti-China forces' claims



In some cases, pro-CCP social media accounts have opportunistically seized on reporting that supports their view that the BBC is biased, even when the story has no direct relationship to China. On 20 February 2021, fringe website *The Grayzone*—the editors of which provide commentary to [Russian](#) and [Chinese](#) state media outlets and [deny China's oppressive Uyghur policies in Xinjiang](#)—published an [article](#) claiming that the UK Foreign and Commonwealth Office funded *Reuters* and the BBC to undertake a campaign to undermine the Russian government's influence (Figure 11). Despite the article having a European and Central Asian focus, some Chinese state media and pro-CCP accounts have shared it in an apparent effort to create further suspicions that the BBC is a propaganda tool of Western intelligence agencies.

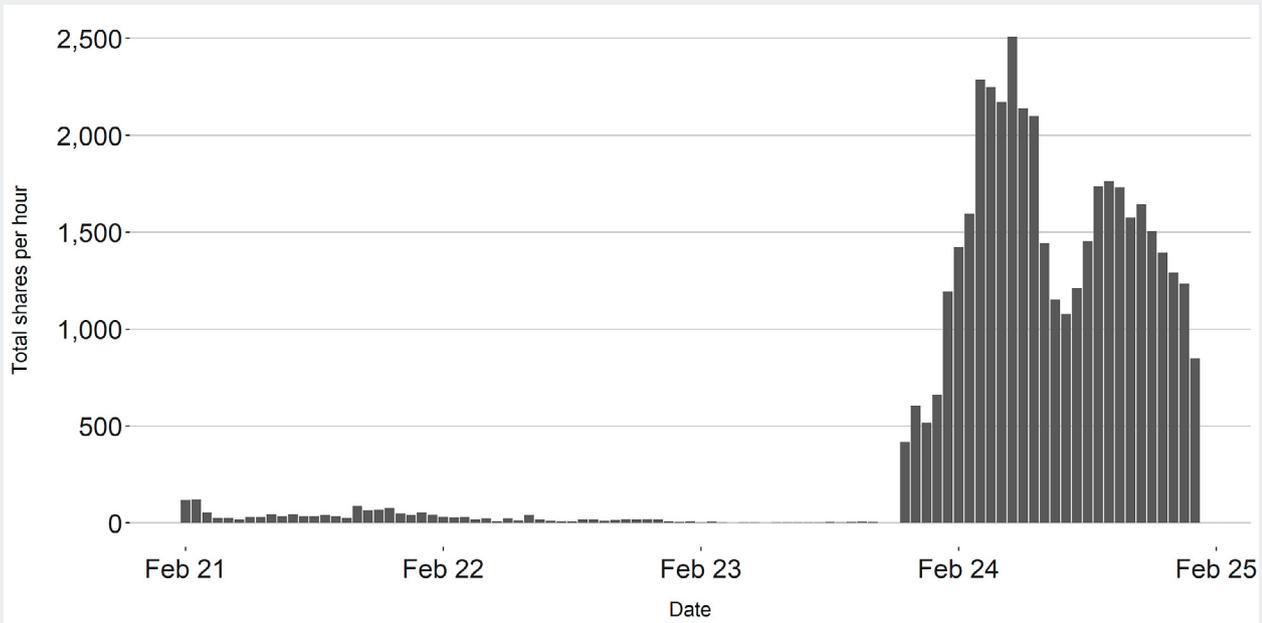
Figure 11: T-House Facebook account sharing a *Grayzone* article



Three days after its publication on 20 February 2021, the *Grayzone* article had received little attention on social media or from news outlets. According to CrowdTangle data, the article had been shared only 60 times on public pages and Facebook groups, including by T-House, an opinion section of Chinese state-owned CGTN, and '21SilkRd', a Facebook group that's [reportedly](#) amplified Chinese and Russian state messaging.

That changed on 23 February 2021, when the article received a massive increase of engagement on Twitter (Figure 12). The *Grayzone* article was shared more than 42,500 times on 24 February (for comparison, it received approximately 1,200 shares on Twitter between 20 and 23 February).

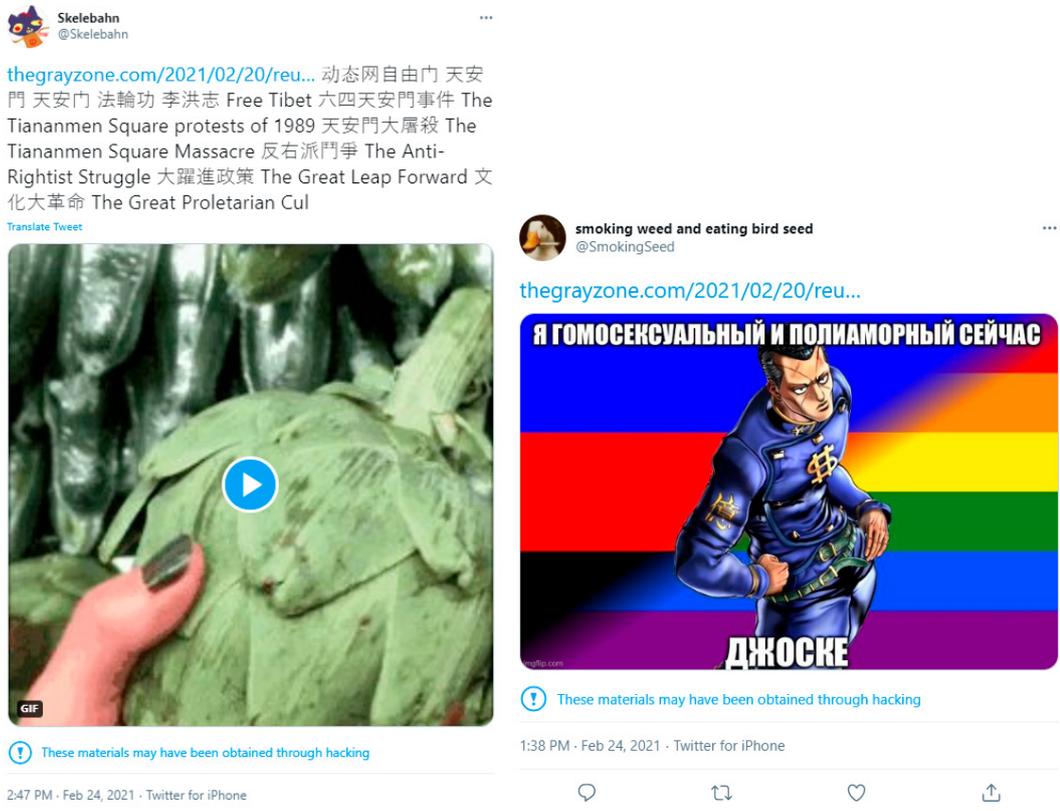
Figure 12: Total shares per hour of *The Grayzone* article titled ‘Reuters, BBC, and Bellingcat participated in covert UK Foreign Office-funded programs to “weaken Russia,” leaked docs reveal’ between 21 and 25 February 2021.



Some users appeared to use Twitter’s new ‘[hacked materials](#)’ label on the *Grayzone* article to create meme posts and test the label, but there were some potential indicators of inauthenticity among a portion of accounts sharing the article. For example, of the 33,109 accounts that shared the article, 3,476 were created in January and February 2021. A manual inspection of a sample of around 100 of those accounts indicated that most had a history of posting largely gaming/meme content.

The vast majority of tweets and images amplifying the *Grayzone* article make no direct reference to the content in the article. Instead, the tweets contain unrelated quotes and images (Figure 13). Posts sharing the article were mostly in English, but there were also a mixture of Chinese and Russian-language tweets.

Figure 13: Tweets sharing the *Grayzone* article



### Mobilisation of pro-CCP Twitter users

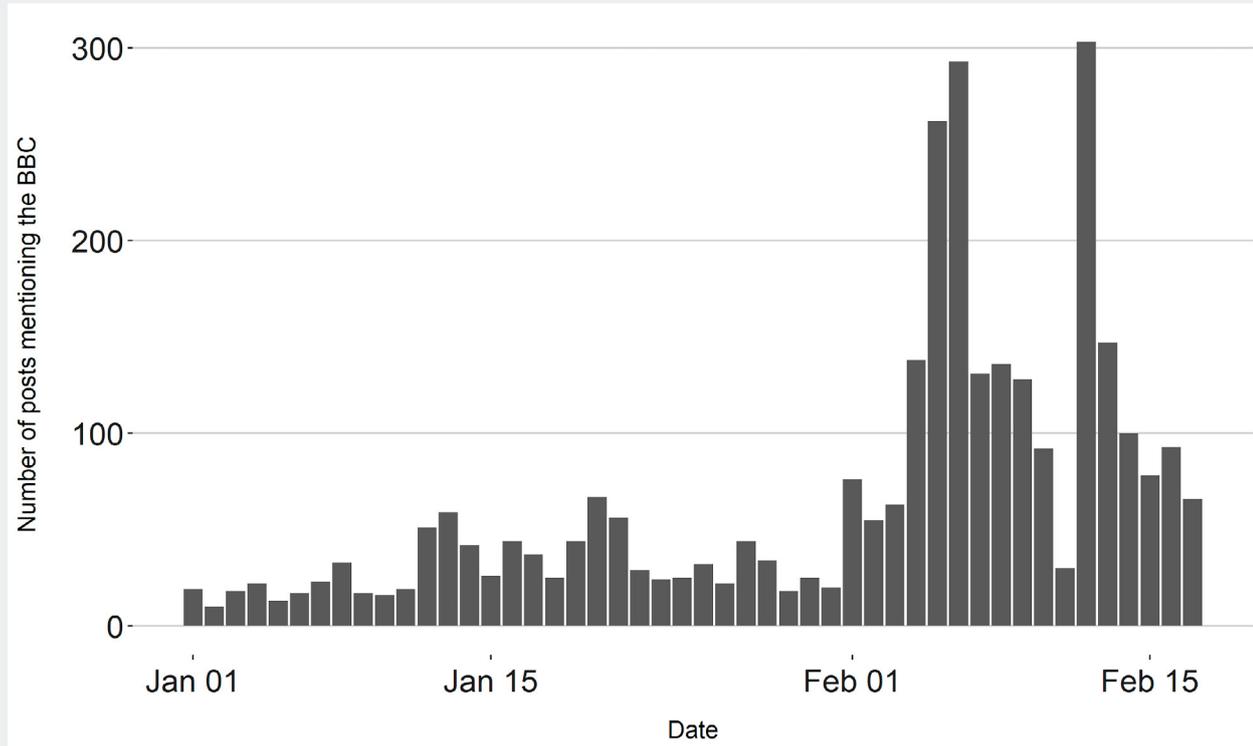
A secondary effect of the Chinese diplomatic and state media discourse about the BBC has been to mobilise pro-CCP Twitter users to join the chorus discrediting the broadcaster. ASPI analysed a sample of 500 accounts that had previously amplified the ‘Fort Detrick’ Covid-19 origin conspiracy theory in January and February 2021 (Figure 14). At least 110 of those same accounts then shifted to criticise the BBC, repeating the same narratives pushed by Chinese diplomats and state media.

Figure 14: Pro-CCP account tweets in 2021



While those accounts are likely to be a combination of real and inauthentic users, they form a fringe online community that amplifies narratives and disinformation originally spread by Chinese diplomats and state media. For example, peak mentions of the BBC by this Twitter community occurred on the same days that Chinese diplomats and state media increased their coverage of the BBC (Figure 15). This is a critically important multiplier effect that helps CCP disinformation and propaganda be effective.

**Figure 15: Total tweets per day mentioning the BBC, 1 January to 17 February 2021**



Not only did the activity of those accounts correlate with Chinese diplomatic and state media activity, but the language used in tweets that cited the BBC also changed between January and February 2021. In January, tweets had mostly neutral sentiments towards the BBC; in February, 'fake news' became the most common phrase used in tweets mentioning the broadcaster (Table 2), following CCP official and state media leads.

**Table 2: Frequency of bigrams (phrases containing two words) in January and February, with common grammatical words filtered out**

January 2021: top 10 bigrams		Frequency
bbcworld	cnni	70
nobelprize	bbcworld	46
哈哈 (haha)	哈哈 (haha)	20
joebiden	kamalaharris	19
asparadog	stichscitgso	16
stichscitgso	bbcworld	16
bbcchinese	好 (good)	15
bbcnewspr	chinadaily	15
rt	rt	15
好 (good)	傢伙 (guy)	14
February 2021: top 10 bigrams		Frequency
fake	news	183
hong	kong	51
globaltimesnews	bbc	50
bbc	world	47
world	news	38
broadcasting	corporation	35
adrian	zenz	29
western	media	28
bbc	reporter	27
qualified	bbc	27

## Conclusion

The CCP's influence apparatus increasingly exploits both pre-existing narratives and content that it sources from Chinese and Western social media and fringe websites, knowing that some of those narratives already have degrees of recognition and resonance that will engage audiences, making them more receptive to the party's distraction tactics and preferred narrative spin.

The expanded presence of its diplomats, media and influencers on Western social media platforms extends the party's discourse power, allowing it to reach directly into international political discourse when the CCP's reputation is on the line. Critique of its systematic surveillance and control of minority ethnic groups, framed in terms of human rights, is particularly sensitive for the CCP. On this issue, to contest and blunt criticism the party will continue to aggressively deploy its propaganda and disinformation apparatus. This is because it believes domestic control to be fundamental to its political power and legitimacy, and because controlling global narratives around key public issues is fundamental to the pursuit of its foreign policy interests.

## Acronyms and abbreviations

BBC	British Broadcasting Corporation
CCP	Chinese Communist Party
CGTN	China Global Television Network
NGO	non-government organisation
UK	United Kingdom

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