CHINA-LINKED INFLUENCE OPERATION ON TWITTER DETECTED ENGAGING WITH THE US PRESIDENTIAL ELECTION

PART 2: DEVELOPMENT REPORT
EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

A network of China-linked accounts operating on Twitter was detected in the run up to the 2020 US Presidential election. These accounts were originally identified as being of interest because they repeatedly posted negative messages about President Trump and Joe Biden, made allegations of election fraud, and engaged with negative narratives about the US response to the coronavirus pandemic.

More recently, they have been detected amplifying reactions to the Capitol Building riot in Washington D.C. on 6th January, drawing comparisons to the West’s responses to political protests in Hong Kong and quickly disseminating tailored propaganda videos. The network possesses signatures of a co-ordinated information-influence operation.

The current report significantly extends and elaborates the analysis set out in the Part 1 ‘detection report’. The latter detailed how accounts linked to the network were identified and provided a preliminary analysis of their activities, sufficient to trigger 400 ‘takedown’ interventions by Twitter prior to the election. Here in the ‘Part 2: Development Report’ we revise and update our assessment and initial understanding in three significant respects:

★ Attribution – the evidence explored in this Part 2 report provides more concrete links between the suspicious network and China: accounts were solely active in Chinese office hours; there was limited activity during a Chinese national holiday; and English language use appears to have been derived from machine translation tools.

★ Sophistication – the network appears to run as a series of almost autonomous ‘cells’, with minimal links connecting them. It is a model similar to how terrorist campaigns typically function. Therefore, it seems that the operators have devised a way of running their accounts to reduce risks of detection by platform algorithms. This tactic also improves network resilience, ensuring that the discovery of one cluster does not threaten the whole network. Hence, the operation of the network is both sophisticated and subtle, which contradicts our initial view that the accounts were relatively low-grade and ineffective.

★ Impact – our original analysis suggested little impact associated with the network. This requires revision, as we have now identified that accounts associated with the China-linked network played an important role in promoting the online visibility of high-profile media stories connected to the Presidential election in November.

Accordingly, this report engages with each of these revisions, presenting new empirical evidence, accompanied by revised interpretations and inferences. The discussion is organised around the following sections:

1. Behavioural Profiling – this methodology has revealed further details about how the network was organised and functioned. This in turn has informed our conclusions about China links as well as emphasising the sophistication and coordination of the network as a whole.

2. Network Structure – by presenting a network graph and qualitative investigations, this section evidences the terrorist cell analogy which further evidences the sophistication of this network.

3. US Political Content – qualitative analysis of messaging content reveal that not only did the network have an interest in US politics, but: aimed to undermine perceptions of US democracy; encouraged violence; and assisted in the dissemination of at least one visual disinformation video claiming ballot burning that went viral.

In respect of this last theme in particular, it is salient that accounts associated with the network were still operational in early January 2021 commenting upon the civil disorder in Washington, seeking to amplify discord and tension following the riot. This built upon their earlier activity where they had been advocating violence in the immediate aftermath of the election results being announced.
The detailed analysis reported herein is the result of investigating an additional 267 accounts that were manually identified as sharing pro-CCP (Chinese Communist Party) content and engaging in co-ordinated inauthentic behaviour. Using the Twitter API, data was collected on 221 of these accounts. 46 accounts were suspended by Twitter in the 5 days between identification and collection, suggesting that our initial categorisation of them was correct.

The most recent 3200 tweets were scraped from across the 221 identified suspicious accounts and searched using the following keywords (and translations thereof): “Trump”, “Biden”, “USA”, “America”, “United States”, “Covid”, “corona”, and “virus”. Tweets matching one or more of these terms were then subject to thematic coding. Where appropriate, content was machine-translated into English prior to coding, reflecting how an estimated 85% of the messages were in Chinese language.

From these data, we mapped likes and retweets between accounts as edges on a network graph illustrated below. This reveals clusters of accounts that appear only to interact with each other.

Figure 1: Network Graph containing all 221 accounts and their network.
SECTION 1: BEHAVIOURAL PROFILING OF ACCOUNTS AND COMMUNITIES IN THE NETWORK

42,618 tweets associated with the 221 accounts that were consistently sharing Chinese propaganda, drawn from the China-linked Twitter ecosystem, were used as the basis for detailed behavioural profiling. The purpose being to provide some basic insights into the network’s operation and organisation.

The analysis revealed that most of the accounts were created in September and October 2020. Thus, it can be observed that there was a pattern of deploying new accounts in the lead-up to the US election.

Figure 2: Accounts created by month.

Intriguingly, accompanying this growth in new accounts was a marked shift in tweet sources away from mobile devices (iPhone and Android), to far greater use of the Twitter Web App. As depicted in Figure 3 below, this shift occurred in

Tweet Volume

![Tweet Volume Chart]
October following a dip in activity associated with a Chinese national holiday.

Figure 3: Tweet volume by the source of tweet shown as a seven-day rolling average.

In Figure 3, it can be observed that a significant proportion of the network’s activity is taking place using Android devices (green), but there is a major growth in use of the Twitter Web App from October onwards (blue). Importantly, this exponential increase in using the Twitter Web App coincides with the creation of the new accounts presented in Figure 2.

Consistent with the initial interpretation set out in the Part 1 report, Figure 4 shows how a sizable proportion of the activity associated with these accounts took place in Chinese language. That said, there were periods of time where there were more tweets in English and Japanese. At this point we are not in a position to establish whether these shifts were reactive to events or other media stories, or more proactive in nature.

Figure 4: Percentage of tweets by language as a seven-day rolling average. A general tweet is a message posted to Twitter that is not a retweet, quote or reply.

**INVESTIGATING LEVELS OF CO-ORDINATION**

Using content and temporal data associated with the posting behaviour of individual accounts, it is possible to group them based upon metrics of coordination. To achieve this, a network is created where accounts are linked based upon the number of times they have shared a unique URL, mention or hashtag within the same hour. Community detection algorithms are then applied to identify ‘communities’ of accounts, derived from similar activity patterns. Figure 5 shows the post distribution of the accounts where each horizontal line is an account’s post history over time grouped and coloured by community.
Figure 5: Post distribution or each community. Each horizontal series is an individual account’s post history.

Plotting time across the ‘x-axis’ thus reveals periods of activity and inactivity, a signal for the coordination of accounts. Figure 5 illustrates that all identified communities behaved similarly, except Community 5. Notably the network partition is very strong suggesting clear subgroups of accounts. From this we might infer multiple accounts are under the control of a single operator, or that software is being used to co-ordinate posting activity across accounts.

Two communities do not conform to the overarching patterns. Community 5’s accounts seem to operate in a completely different manner to the rest of the accounts and Community 14 has very little recent activity, the majority occurring in the first half of 2020. Further investigation is needed to confirm if there is a reason for these differing patterns.

‘PATTERN OF LIFE’ ANALYSIS CONFIRMING CHINA LINKS

‘Pattern of life’ analysis comprises a set of intelligence techniques designed to illuminate the behavioural routines and norms of subjects of interest. Applying a similar logic to the 221 accounts of interest here, provides several indicators that (1) the accounts are operated by employees of an organization (as opposed to citizens coordinating these accounts in their spare time) and (2) adherence to Chinese time zones would suggest that they are located in China.

For example, China celebrates three holidays each year known as “Golden Weeks”, one of which starts on 1st October1 and runs for 7-8 days. Below, Figure 6 shows the operators of these accounts observing this holiday, with a significant drop in levels of activity.

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Active Users Over Time

Figure 6: Graph showing number of active users (those who tweeted on a given day). Weekdays are shown in blue and weekends in grey. Community 5 is omitted for clarity.

Extending the temporal focus of the analysis, Figure 7 displays the tweet volume per hour for each day of the week for the 221 accounts. Adjusting the time by UTC+08:00 reveals account behaviour consistent with the five-day Chinese working week, with a fall in activity around midday and on Saturdays.

Account Activity

Figure 7: Heatmap showing account activity per hour for each day of the week. Time is adjusted to China Standard Time which is UTC+08:00. Community 5 is omitted for clarity.
The operators of the accounts appear to be based in this time zone and behave to a schedule as an employee would, starting at 9:00 and finishing at 17:00. There is practically no activity in the evening after 17:00 or prior to 9:00. The accounts are almost exclusively operated during business hours. Interestingly, the hour of account creation does not align with this, with accounts being created at all hours of the day. This suggests the accounts are potentially set up or acquired separately. While it is possible that fully automated systems could mimic this working pattern, it seems as if many of the accounts of interest are operated by humans.

Based upon this analysis, the inference can be plausibly made that the network of accounts are being run by operators located in China. Part 1 of this report, based upon a preliminary analysis, was quite cautious about attribution, on the grounds that it could have been an operation run by patriotic groups located overseas. However, the temporal and language analysis reported above, taken in conjunction with the fact that use of Twitter is not permitted for ordinary Chinese citizens, provides increasing levels of proof that, on the balance of probabilities, it is unlikely that the network operates without some official awareness and/or guidance. This is significant given the levels of influence and interference in US politics that the accounts have engaged in.

SECTION 2: NETWORK STRUCTURE

This section evidences that the network is organised and sophisticated in its structure, emulating similar techniques to those used by terrorist cells. Specifically: (1) the overall network maintains a focus on propagating strategic narratives; whilst (2) each cluster maintains a specialisation in its operation; all the time (3) ensuring limited connectivity between individual cell clusters. Figure 8 visualizes the overall network, highlighting the different clusters investigated.
The evidence that this is an information-influence operation is the relationships, or more precisely the lack thereof, between the clusters. Notably, Figure 8 illustrates that it is rare that clusters will interact with each other, and where they do so this tends to be channelled through a single nodal account. This is a model of organization familiar from the operating procedures used by terrorist cells, to minimize the risks of overall network discovery should a cell be compromised.

The use of a single account as a ‘bridge’ between clusters is evidenced in Figure 9 where the connections between Cluster 1 and 2 have been mapped.

![Figure 9: Single Node connectivity between two clusters.](image)

The different clusters identified within the network focused upon different content and had differing operational tactics. This notwithstanding, there were some common patterns in appearance and behaviour which are worth highlighting, as it demonstrates that they are still co-ordinating.

### COMMONALITIES

Overall, most accounts did not employ sophisticated efforts to hide their inauthenticity. Indicators which evidence this are provided below:

### APPEARANCE

Many of the accounts were created recently; have generic names and Twitter ID’s; and use generic pictures:

- 49 accounts used Chinese characters in their screen names.
- 62 accounts had first-name last name structure to their display names.
- 44 accounts had women in the display picture.
- 43 accounts had blank cover photos.
- 53 accounts had landscapes and/or generic scenic pictures in their cover and/or display photos.

### BEHAVIOUR

- 69 accounts were suspended at time of analysis belonging to Cluster 5.
- 111 accounts were bilingual, 38 were Chinese language only, and 11 did not have any Chinese language.
Very few accounts only expressed one behavioural element (Retweet, Reply, Tweet, Favourite). This was the only semi-sophisticated pattern throughout this analysis.

113 accounts used Twitter Web App in some capacity to disseminate their tweets.

**CONTENT**

Most accounts associated with a cluster were propagating similar themes and disseminated them in a reactive way to political statements and events. The accounts achieved much of their propagation through links to YouTube, rather than hashtags, which we have seen previously.

One key theme was the **denigration of Hong Kong (N = 114 accounts)**.

- This theme was propagated in three ways: (1) Hong Kong as having riots; (2) as ungrateful for China’s efforts; and (3) as struggling with the pandemic.
- Other methods included the dissemination of long statements concerning Guo Wengui (N=32), and criticism of UK and US “interference” later in the year.

Another key theme was **Covid-19 (N= 82 accounts, 861 tweets)**.

- Covid-19 was presented as ‘overwhelming’ government capacity and capability; using the virus to slander multiple governments as incompetent.
- Covid-19 was also used for messaging against President Trump, particularly his references to the “China Virus”.
- Accounts also claimed that the virus had originated outside of China, one example linking the virus to the US laboratory in Fort Detrick.

Many accounts communicated their politics through links to YouTube (N=106), making YouTube the primary platform this network redirects to. Notably, at the time of analysis, many of the YouTube accounts had already been suspended.

Hashtags were present in less than 2% of total tweets in 2020 (N = 37325). This highlights that hashtag use was not a key method to disseminate messages.

A sizeable proportion of the English language messages were written with poor grammar and/or syntax - it is possible that they were produced using translation software.

The accounts were reactive, either to news articles which mentioned China, or to political events. For example, the largest ‘spikes’ in the number of US-related tweets were following: (1) the US election; and (2) Donald Trump’s statement that Covid-19 might be linked to a laboratory in China.

**DIFFERENCES BETWEEN CLUSTERS**

In this subsection we highlight three clusters to illustrate the key operational differences between the clusters in the network.
CLUSTER 4

Cluster 4, pictured below, had a prime account, @Nindeanna, which was supported by a small cluster of ‘support’ accounts.

5 of the 6 ‘support’ accounts were almost identical: they have clear first and last names; they have 8 numbers in their Twitter ID; have 90-96 tweets; have 39-44 favourites; were set up in September 2020; and are following 1-2 accounts. The last ‘support’ account was set up in October and was less active, possibly created because the operator decided that account @Nindeanna required additional amplification. 

@Nindeanna promoted a clear message: that Hong Kong was a chaotic nation, and that China was more technologically advanced and stable. Tweets were predominantly in English language, and the account regularly linked to Chinese YouTube videos which appear to contain propaganda.

CLUSTER 6

Unlike Cluster 4, Cluster 6 had many more accounts (N = 43) and the accounts didn’t have a clear prime/support relationship, instead appearing to feed from each other. An image of Cluster 6 is provided in Figure 13:

Figure 11: Network graph of Cluster 4 (N = 7).

Figure 12: @Nindeanna profile and tweets from Cluster 4.

Figure 13: Cluster 6 Visualisation, (N = 43).
Cluster 6 (N=43) was labelled as the ‘Dracula Cluster’ as four accounts quoted extracts from Bram Stoker’s novel Dracula within their bio. These quotations were particularly strange as they were in the middle of sentences and didn’t have any specific meaning. This signature was not repeated elsewhere: hardly any other account had a bio, and no other cluster had patterns between their bios’. An example of a sentence is provided in Figure 14:

![Figure 14: Screen-capture of account @Rebecca19220217 from Cluster 6.](image)

Figure 14 also highlights another Cluster 6 trait, many of the profile pictures contained women (N=17) and used suggestive imagery (N = 7). Furthermore, 6 accounts, similar to @Rebecca19220217, reused the same image for the display picture and cover photo: all of which were sexually suggestive, and three of which depicted women.

**CLUSTER 8**

Cluster 8, depicted in Figure 15, had different operative signatures again:

![Figure 15: Network graph of Cluster 8 (N = 27).](image)

Far more focused upon US politics, with 23 out of 27 accounts engaging with content on this theme, the primary operation of this cluster appeared to be the promotion of high quality, English language, anti-US propaganda films, subtitled with Chinese. These were short, high tempo videos that portrayed the US on the verge of collapse from hunger, riots, and COVID-19. These videos were hosted on YouTube, with around half the cluster posting them in original tweets, to be amplified by the rest of the cluster.

Interestingly, some of the users retweeted English language non-political content such as sport, music and games between their propaganda videos. Others did not attempt to obfuscate the propaganda with non-political posts. This obfuscation behaviour was only seen in one other cluster, making it another Cluster 8 signature.
This section provides evidence that, contrary to the preliminary analysis set out in the Part 1 report, the China-linked network of accounts did in fact achieve substantive impact in the lead-up to the Presidential election. Two accounts associated with the network contributed to the early dissemination of a key video which we judge to be disinformation designed to cause conflict. This video went on to achieve significant media visibility.

**INTEREST IN US POLITICS**

Evidence of the network’s interest in trying to influence US politics is:

- ★ Over 2000 tweets propagated specific narratives related to US politics and/or the US coronavirus response.
- ★ Over 500 tweets mentioned Donald Trump and/or Joe Biden specifically.

The encouragement of perceptions of discord in the US was the predominant purpose of these interactions. For example, the vast majority of the tweets referencing President Trump were negative in sentiment. The small subset of tweets (N=80) that were positive towards Trump primarily centred on either delegitimising the election process, or promoting protests against the election result. Examples of these themes are provided in Figure 16.

Figure 16: Tweet Examples Advocating Violent Protest and Election Illegitimacy.
Targeted investigative research revealed that both accounts displayed in Figure 16 show a similar pattern of behaviour and cover similar content - pro-China, anti-US tweets that overlap with out-of-place pro-Trump tweets, advocating for a forceful response to the US election result. Although these individual tweets have not gained significant traction, this may suggest a subversive tactic of attempting to sow discord and influence the post-election discourse.

Other controversial US-based themes that the accounts interacted with were Black Lives Matter issues; typically alluding to human rights abuses against African Americans and Asian Americans. These being used to claim ‘moral equivalency’ when compared to accusations of human rights abuses in China.

![Figure 17: Tweet from @thefakefarmer displaying theme Black Lives Matter.](image)

In November, there was an increase in tweets from the network advocating support for protests about the election result, including the use of firearms. Other tweets also referred to weapon use at Black Lives Matter protests and “civil war”. Related to which were multiple messages amplifying claims of fraud in the conduct of the election and criticizing American democracy.

**THE ‘BALLOT BURNING’ VIRAL VIDEO**

On election day (03/11/20), a video of a male filming himself allegedly burning “about 80” Trump-voting ballots on Virginia Beach was detected circulating across several platforms, including Instagram. The male filming claims that when “you work in a mail or polling place you got to do what you got to [do]”. The person filming the video was not identified, although it is clear that they knew that these were blank sample ballots and that releasing this misleading content would create conflict. Figure 18 shows this video on Instagram:

![Figure 18: Instagram account @menschsandy1 shares the burning ballot video. Dated 5th November. Video description originally written in German, translated using Google Translate.](image)
The video went viral quickly after Eric Trump’s official Twitter account shared a link to it, a screenshot of which is available in Figure 19. This version alone received over 1.2 million views\(^2\), evidencing considerable impact potential.

The City of Virginia debunked the claim within their election brief issued on the 3rd of November\(^3\) (election day), stating that the ballots did not contain bar-codes, the black blocks in the border, and therefore they were sample ballots. This suggests that the original video was taken either on or before polling day. This debunk was then amplified in multiple public investigations in mainstream media (e.g. USA Today\(^4\)), which also classified the video as disinformation, although the USA Today fact check did not occur until the 5th of November.

Figure 19: account @EricTrump sharing Burning Ballot video. Dated 4th of November 2020.

The video’s journey and role of the China-linked accounts

As depicted in Figure 21, the video was widely assumed to originate from account @Ninja_StuntZ, as this was the version of the video that gained most traction. @Ninja_StuntZ is associated with the QAnon movement, known for spreading fake news, which aided the plausibility that this account was ‘patient zero’ in the transmission pathway. However, our investigation has uncovered evidence that two China-linked accounts, @wan_ofakind and @Theo_fletcher shared the video before @Ninja_StuntZ.

@Ninja_StuntZ, which has now been suspended by Twitter, was responsible for spreading multiple stories of election-based disinformation in the run-up to the election. We were able to find a copy of the ballot burning video saved within Ninja_StuntZ’s related YouTube account (Ninjastuntz). In addition, it was found that a self-identified QAnon account commented on the video, “ThanQ for your service”, suggesting that Ninja_StuntZ was associated with, or at least benefitted, the QAnon movement. Secondly, in the video description, the operator of Ninja_StuntZ detailed several ‘suspect’ accounts, including the 2 China-linked accounts, one of which Ninja_StuntZ claims shared the same video before Ninja_StuntZ did.

\(^3\) https://www.vbgov.com/news/pages/selected.aspx?release=5046&title=city+of+virginia+beach+election+brief+%e2%80%93+5+p.m
Both of the China-linked accounts of interest, @Wan_ofakind, and @theo_fletcher, shared the video on the 4th, before @Ninja_StuntZ. However, given Virginia Council debunked it on the 3rd, we can ascertain that they were not the original sources. It was identified that Theo_Fletcher had replied to comments claiming that they received the video in a ‘group chat’. The account revealed no other details as to the source of the video. They were though engaged early on in its propagation and from our point of view the simplified key steps in its transmission pathway towards virality were:

The engagement of Eric Trump’s account with the video was obviously crucial in affording it significant reach. Nevertheless, the early engagement of the China-linked accounts in this way is totemic of how such information operations seek to function, pushing disinformation into the media stream in the hope that other, more influential users, will pick it up and propagate the message.

The (now suspended) @Theo_Fletcher account was set up in March 2020, tweeted in English and had few personal details provided in the bio section. However, the account interacted in a relatively authentic way in comparison to other bot-like accounts, and openly advertised that it belonged to a Chinese diaspora user. In respect of the ballot burning video, the account deleted the video before our investigation could record it, potentially suggesting a level of awareness as to how controversial the topic had become.

Theo also engaged in ‘liking’ many Chinese official sources, such as the Chinese embassy in the US, the official Chinese spokesperson account, and various state media outlets, some of which have liked Theo’s account in turn. For example, Theo liked Tom Fowdy’s account seven times and Tom liked Theo six times. Tom Fowdy is particularly interesting as he works for Chinese state media CGTN as a regular columnist. The rest of his likes were dominated by influential Chinese accounts such as @ConcernedHK who recently posted the following image, showing British, American and Australian forces as Nazi sympathisers. These are old and recycled images from 2013 and earlier:

5 For example, a Guardian investigation reveals one of the images to be from 2013: https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2013/oct/27/british-soldiers-nazi-salutes-afghanistan
@Wan_ofakind has been liked by 13 accounts who also liked @Theo_Fletcher, showing that they travel in the same ‘thought communities’. A further similarity is that @Wan_ofakind also operated in English and amplified messages with pro-Chinese Communist Party narratives. In so doing, they were acting as ‘primes’ for a number of other accounts in the community.

THE WASHINGTON D.C. CAPITOL BUILDING RIOT, 6TH JANUARY 2021

“The riots in Congress are a disgrace to the United States today, and will soon become the fuse of the American order https://t.co/ncmK883FdR”

This message was tweeted by two of the China-linked accounts from the network as part of the convulsion of reaction to the violence that took place on 6th January in the Capitol Building in Washington D.C.. It is demonstrative of how the network is reactive to events in the world, using them as opportunities to project the values and strategic narratives being pursued as part of China’s approach to geopolitical strategic communications. In the above case, this centred on besmirching the reputation and stability of the US. Significantly, these were not the only accounts to engage in this way. Broadly speaking, two key narratives were propagated:

★ Asserting ‘double standards’ by comparing US politicians’ statements after Hong Kong protestors entered the legislative building with their statements about US protestors entering the Capitol Building.

★ Presenting the US as a chaotic nation on the verge of political collapse and major disorder.

Figure 23: below highlights one of the accounts retweeting Chinese State-affiliated media, showing also how they interact with and endorse the politics of Chinese State accounts.

If those who stormed US Capitol were “domestic terrorists” as future US leader & US media said, then the mobs who stormed/vandalized HK Legislative Council, threw hundreds petrol-bombs, destroyed subway stations, paralyzed airport were “hardcore terrorists”. Otherwise no logic.

8:06 pm - 7 Jan 2021 - Twitter for iPhone

Figure 23. Account @michshsh retweeting account @chenweihua displaying theme ‘double standard’

There is also evidence of coordinated behaviour when promoting the ‘US-in-chaos’ narrative. Two of four identical tweets that were detected are reproduced in Figure 24 below. This provides confirmatory evidence in support of our previous conclusions that the network engages in co-ordinated efforts to disseminate its chosen narratives.
The demonstration with clear political purpose indicates the split of public opinion and social division, and also implies that unrest is imminent.

The two messages above are clearly intended to highlight a lack of internal cohesion and significant social divisions. The consistent engagement with such controversial themes, when reacting to geopolitical events, articulated a sustained interest in trying to undermine western democratic processes and encourage civil unrest.

Echoing some of the themes used by the right-wing US ‘patriot’ communities in their messaging, some of the China-linked accounts have sought to link contemporary events with their historical precedents, as a way of endowing the violence with some legitimacy. For example:

The operators were also quick to capitalise on the events in the Capitol introducing a new range of English language propaganda videos targeting the US. We logged the first video referencing the break-in at the Capitol Building at 21:49 EST (10:49 CST) mere hours after the operators would have started work. The YouTube account who uploaded this video has now been removed, but other accounts from the network posted propaganda videos with titles such as ‘Trump’s final madness cannot stop his doomsday’, ‘Making conflicts wantonly is just playing with fire’ and ‘The last madness shows the desire for power’. This not only illustrates clear targeting of the US, but provides insights into the operator’s sophistication: these are not the actions of disparate individuals, but a sophisticated network which can create and propagate propaganda rapidly.
Extending and elaborating the evidence and interpretation set out in the Part 1 report, based upon additional analysis, here in Part 2 we have significantly developed and revised our assessment of the activities and sophistication of the China-linked network of accounts.

Our original analysis indicated little impact associated with the network. However, further investigation has revealed key episodes, where China-linked accounts played an important role in promoting a video alleging ballot burning following the US Presidential election, that achieved high media visibility. In the post-election phase, other accounts have been amplifying calls for violence, including in respect of the recent riots in the Capitol Building.

It has also been possible to link a number of additional accounts to the network suggesting it may be of a larger scale than initially estimated. Critically, although we notified Twitter about 400 accounts that were then suspended, and there is evidence of them having identified additional activity associated with the network, many of these accounts are still operational – as demonstrated by their engagement with the recent events in Washington D.C.

Arguably, the key finding of this Part 2 report relates to the sophistication of account behaviours. Whilst their content was often fairly low-grade, their behaviour patterns were unusual and appear to have been designed to avoid detection by Twitter. For example, the signals of co-ordination were frequently quite subtle and there was clearly a deliberate avoidance of using hashtags. This raises an intriguing question about how the operators had learned what was and was not likely to ‘trip’ Twitter’s detection algorithms. This could have been gleaned from experience and learning from past (dis)information operations, but could also plausibly derive from other sources.

In summary, the network appears designed to run as a series of almost autonomous ‘cells’, with minimal links connecting them. This is similar to how terrorist campaigns are typically organised and co-ordinated. It suggests a degree of planning and forethought that marks this as a significant attempt to influence the trajectory of US politics.
Cardiff University’s OSCAR (Open Source Communications Analytics Research) programme is a large-scale international research effort to understand the causes and consequences of information, influence and interference operations and disinformation campaigns. Supported by a range of partner organisations and agencies, the aim is to develop a more scientific and evidence-based perspective on how and why disinformation works to influence public perceptions and agendas. Blending methodologies and ideas from across the social, behavioural and data sciences, our highly experienced team of analysts have applied a range of tools and techniques, including state-of-the-art A.I., to study disinformation during election campaigns, public health crises and terror attacks. Our work has involved intensive investigations in over 20 countries worldwide.