

## The Role of “State Endorsers” in Extending Chinese Propaganda: Evaluating the Reach of Pro-Regime YouTubers

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This comparative study investigates the role of non-state actors in China’s external propaganda via YouTube and Twitter. We introduce the term “state endorsers” to characterize a group of foreign residents in China who do not have an open affiliation with the state but express views overwhelmingly in line with the official narrative. Our cross-platform analysis shows that Chinese officials promote the state endorsers on Twitter, thus creating the impression of diverse voices supporting China’s policies. When comparing the reach of state endorsers with that of Chinese state media (altogether 153,932 videos and 5.41 million comments and replies), we find evidence that state endorsers extend China’s public diplomacy to engage new audiences, amounting to a 48% increase on YouTube and 29% on Twitter. We argue in the conclusion that using the term state endorser provides better conceptual clarity and empirical operationalizability for understanding the roles of non-state actors in China’s increasingly assertive digital diplomacy.

*Keywords: public diplomacy, China, social media, YouTube, Twitter, non-state actors*

Digitalization is changing public diplomacy practices around the world, and social media platforms have become a key battleground for influencing public opinion (Manor, 2019, 2021). Globally, this is blurring the lines between foreign and domestic audiences as well as “empowering new actors” (Bjola, Cassidy, & Manor, 2019, p. 1). China as a case study is interesting in this respect because it has recently taken a more aggressive approach to becoming an active digital public diplomacy player (Schliebs, Bailey, Bright, & Howard, 2021). In this study, the data indicate that China has launched at least 401 official Twitter accounts in a short time frame (see Methods). Domestically, however, access to YouTube and Twitter remains blocked.

The Chinese government has displayed a great interest in controlling the narrative on foreign social media platforms, and since 2019 it has invested heavily in its official accounts (Huang & Wang, 2021). The success of China’s digital public diplomacy effort has been limited; the state media especially, one of the main channels of China’s public diplomacy campaign, struggle to gain trust from foreign audiences. News

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Date submitted: 2022-05-19

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sharing for these accounts further declined after YouTube and Twitter introduced labels that inform users about their state and government affiliations, especially for political content (Liang, 2021; Wasserman & Madrid-Morales, 2018). With the domestic censorship system preventing ordinary citizens from accessing YouTube and Twitter, China lacks credible actors who could otherwise create a positive image abroad, such as civil society groups, influencers, and nongovernmental organizations (NGOs; Ingenhoff, Calamai, & Sevin, 2021). Both non-Chinese and Chinese scholars have long cited the lack of domestic non-state actors as one of the biggest drawbacks of China's public diplomacy (d'Hooghe, 2011; Hartig, 2016; Zhu, 2013).

Foreign YouTubers appear to partly fill this vacancy in China's digital public diplomacy. Their videos target foreigners who are interested in China, and because they do not have an open affiliation with the state, they are more likely to be perceived as authentic and trustworthy by the target audiences. However, our study sample shows that a considerable number of foreign YouTubers present viewpoints in their videos that are overwhelmingly in line with the official accounts of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP). This is underlined by the fact that China's Foreign Ministry representatives, diplomats, and state media share the videos on Twitter. The foreign YouTubers thereby complement China's digital public diplomacy, which was previously lacking authentic voices from on the ground.

This study aims to examine whether China's strategy to use foreign YouTubers for public diplomacy succeeded. Specifically, we evaluate its effectiveness by measuring the size of additional audiences that the group of individual YouTubers reaches beyond the audiences of Chinese institutional accounts like state media (Rauchfleisch & Kaiser, 2020). Our overarching objective is to offer a new conceptualization for this emerging group of non-state actors in China's public diplomacy. We introduce the term "state endorser" to describe foreign non-state actors who are used by the Chinese government to tell positive stories abroad. We argue that the term "state endorser" better reflects their role as supporters of China's official narrative than the term "non-state actor," which is traditionally used in Western public diplomacy studies and evokes a clear-cut distinction between state and non-state actors, which is not applicable to China.

### **Defining and Problematizing Non-State Actors in Public Diplomacy**

At the most basic level, public diplomacy describes long-term efforts by transnational actors to engage with foreign audiences and build a positive reputation, which ideally will lead to a favorable environment for foreign policy. The emphasis is on *public* because both the target as well as the senders can be members of the public. Public diplomacy thus stands in contrast to traditional diplomacy, where all parties involved are state actors, as well as to state-led propaganda, which as the name suggests is state-led and usually organized in a top-down approach.

When studying non-state actors such a general definition of public diplomacy is not sufficient because it lacks clear boundaries (Ayhan, 2019). Defining non-state actors simply by their status as members of the public means that nearly all transnational communication can count as public diplomacy, which offers no analytical clarity. Following La Porte's (2012) definition, public diplomacy is a process of communication that is minimally institutionalized and seeks to engage and influence foreign publics regarding policies and international relations. La Porte (2012) writes that non-state actors need to meet two conditions to qualify as legitimate non-state public diplomacy actors: First, they must be institutionalized,

that is, they must "have a basic organization, clear objectives, stable representation, and coordinated activity" (p. 450). Second, they must have a political agenda, understood as the "desire to have a permanent influence on policies, procedures, and international relations" (La Porte, 2012, p. 450). Intentionality and communication as the main tools of the initiative can further be added as criteria for defining non-state public diplomacy actors (Ayhan, 2019).

### **Public Diplomacy in China**

China has a complicated history with public diplomacy. Before the 1990s, the Chinese leadership did not pay much attention to external communication and mostly viewed it as a translated version of domestic propaganda. When the massacre of protestors in Beijing in 1989, which the CCP refers to as the "Tiananmen incident," increased negative perceptions of China internationally, the Chinese leadership declared external communication a matter of national security (Ohlberg, 2013). Countering what they perceived as unfair coverage in Western media became an important goal. Chinese academics led the government to reframe its external propaganda as public diplomacy, a concept that was gaining popularity in the United States in the early 2000s. They hoped that this would make China's narrative of peaceful rise more palatable to Western audiences, but the change from external propaganda to public diplomacy was never fully executed. Institutionally, the responsibility for public diplomacy in China is "firmly lodged within the propaganda system" (Creemers, 2015, p. 308). And for two decades, "China has been focusing on top-down, state-centered public diplomacy" (Jia & Li, 2020, p. 10). As a result, China's official communication has been "heavy-handed and clumsy" at times and has had limited success (Ohlberg, 2013, p. 11). Especially China's state media have "struggled to gain credibility internationally" (Madrid-Morales & Gorfinkel, 2018, p. 918).

Under President Xi Jinping, China has renewed attempts to diversify its external communication without giving up control (Yan, 2014). To persuade influential foreigners to spread positive stories about China, the government, as well as major Chinese companies, have long used paid travel and conferences as an incentive. But under Xi, the "numbers of all-expenses-paid quasi-scholarly and quasi-official conferences in China [exploded] on an unprecedented scale" making them "a notable feature of the Xi era" (Brady, 2017, p. 9). Notably, Chinese academics and policy advisers often cite Russia Today (RT) as a positive example and praise the more market-oriented and "informal style" of the Russian state media compared with Chinese state media (Repnikova, 2022, p. 23). RT's confrontational attitude toward the West also serves as a model for Chinese state media, which follow in the footsteps of its Russian counterpart because RT has already achieved what many Chinese state media hope to accomplish: Recognition among foreign audiences (Morales, 2018).

Starting in 2019, Chinese diplomats and embassies joined Twitter on a large scale (Schliebs et al., 2021). To create the impression of diversity they frequently quote external sources that present China in a positive light, including foreign newspapers and academic journals. Huang and Arifon (2018) call this strategy "discursive polyphony," which "mobilizes different voices, opinions, and communication tones," but makes sure that "they do not cross the red line of CPC censorship" (Huang & Wang, 2021, p. 1928). With China's increased presence on Twitter, Chinese government officials and state media also started employing a more assertive tone, especially toward the United States and Germany (Huang, 2021; Martin, 2021).

However, studies find that this strategy has limited impact and runs the risk of backfiring (Jerdén, Rühlig, Seaman, & Turcsányi, 2021; Mattingly & Sundquist, 2022). All in all, China's online public diplomacy activities have become more sophisticated and targeted over the years (Min & Luqiu, 2021). But one key issue remains since the CCP first implemented public diplomacy: The CCP lacks authentic voices that can tell positive China stories to the world from within China. The foreign YouTubers appear to fill this vacancy.

### **Mobilizing Positive China Stories Online**

Political communication on YouTube is a well-established research field in the West, but few studies have been published on political YouTubers in nondemocratic regimes outside the West (Litvinenko, 2021). Previous research in Asia has studied YouTube channels run by Western foreigners in Taiwan and Korea but not in China and not under the lens of political communication (Chang & Chang, 2019; Oh & Oh, 2017).

Despite YouTube being blocked from access in China, we identified more than 100 English-language YouTube channels by foreigners in China (see Methods), the majority of which are for entertainment purposes, covering travel, food, fashion, and language learning, with no politically sensitive content. But 25 channels mix entertainment and political content, posting various videos on highly sensitive topics and overwhelmingly in line with the official CCP narrative. The pro-CCP YouTubers are predominantly White men from Europe and North America, with some coming from Colombia, Venezuela, Singapore, Israel, Australia, and New Zealand. They regularly reference or recommend each other's channels and sometimes appear in joint productions. Between 2012 and 2018, they altogether produced one to two videos per day on average. In 2019, the number of videos posted on these pro-CCP YouTube channels increased, reaching 2.5 videos per day on average. The increase came while China dramatically expanded its presence on Twitter, with Chinese diplomats and embassies joining the social network on a large scale. It continued to grow, and by 2021, the overall average number of posts reached five videos daily.

Nearly all the foreign pro-CCP YouTubers that we identified, 21 of 25, have posted videos denying human rights violations in Xinjiang, a highly sensitive topic in China, either directly or indirectly by showing video footage that allegedly shows peaceful and undisturbed places in the region. More than half of them have also used the platform to position themselves in opposition to Western mainstream media, claiming to be more credible than foreign journalists, whom they describe as biased against China. This is notable because it is both a common theme in China's official narrative on social media as well as in political commentaries by YouTubers outside China with a conspiracy mentality (Lewis, 2020). The tonality on the accounts varies, with some YouTubers indicating their stance openly in video titles and others taking a more subtle approach of "not saying but showing." All echo the Chinese government's line, especially on issues that are contested.

The YouTubers clearly fall into La Porte's (2012) definition of non-state public diplomacy actors. They each have an established online presence with a substantial followership who comment and reply under their videos. They produce joint videos and recommend each other's channels, which indicates a shared goal to convince foreign publics of their view on China's policies. They seek attention with provoking statements and employ advanced video editing, which indicates intentionality. But simply calling them non-state actors does not reflect their ambiguous relationship with the Chinese state, which not only tolerates

their breach of the firewall but promotes them. They serve a specific function in diversifying China's official narrative, which is the only reason they can propagate political content on YouTube and Twitter from within China. Many non-state foreigners, especially journalists and academics, who publish articles that contradict or challenge the official CCP narrative have been threatened, deported from, and denied visas to mainland China. The catchall term non-state actor implies that the YouTubers are categorically independent, hinting that they enjoy freedom of speech without government influence, when in fact no non-state actor criticizing China's policies in Xinjiang would be tolerated inside China.

We argue that state endorser better describes the role that these foreign non-state actors play in China's public diplomacy. The term endorser is derived from advertising and marketing, where the endorsement of a brand by a social media influencer has been shown as an effective advertising strategy (Jiménez-Castillo & Sánchez-Fernández, 2019; Schouten, Janssen, & Verspaget, 2020). Compared with traditional celebrities, brand endorsers are perceived as more credible and trustworthy because the audience can identify with them. The *perceived* expertise of the endorser is thought to be a key factor in increasing their credibility in advertising a product (Ismagilova, Slade, Rana, & Dwivedi, 2020; Ladhari, Massa, & Skandrani, 2020). Applying advertising theory to external communication, we reconceptualize actors with limited institutionalization and no manifest ties to the state as state endorsers. They echo the official narrative on contested issues but, according to advertising theory, should be more likely to be trusted by target audiences who would not have subscribed to the Chinese state narrative otherwise. Therefore, the effectiveness of mobilizing state endorsers can be evaluated by the number of new audiences they reach beyond the original base of Chinese propaganda. There is little empirical evidence regarding the influence of individual social media users on public diplomacy. One cross-country study (Ingenhoff et al., 2021) in Europe finds that individual Twitter users are highly influential in shaping the country image. Ingenhoff and colleagues (2021) state that across three countries analyzed in their study, individual Twitter users were more active and more engaged with other users than any other group, including state actors and other non-state actors such as NGOs.

Against this backdrop, we put forward the following three research questions:

*RQ1: Do the state endorsers extend the reach of China's state media to new audiences?*

*RQ2: If yes in RQ1, what are the profiles of the new audiences who are reached by the state endorsers but not by the Chinese state media?*

*RQ3: When did Chinese officials start mobilizing state endorsers?*

## **Methods**

We employed a comparative mixed-method approach to study cross-platform audience engagement on YouTube and Twitter. In the first step, the first and second authors conducted snowball sampling independently to compile a list of state-endorser channels on YouTube. Three channels—The Barretts, Jason Lightfoot, and Barrie Jones—selected from news media reports and online forums served as seed accounts. Inclusion criteria were personal channels of users who self-identified as foreigners living in

China and have posted videos on politically sensitive topics that are in line with the official CCP narrative and whose videos are predominantly in English. The initial sampling produced a list of 56 YouTube channels, some of which appeared to have changed their stance toward CCP policies over time or were by travelers who had lived in China for only a period of time. The codebook was discussed and modified, and the authors conducted a second round of independent coding to select only channels that were overwhelmingly in line with the CCP narrative throughout time, meaning they had echoed the official narrative on foreign policy issues like Xinjiang, Tibet, Taiwan, Hong Kong, the COVID-19 pandemic, Meng Wanzhou, and the Olympics on multiple occasions. The authors discussed the results and agreed on 25 YouTube channels, which were then classified as state endorsers.

At the time of sampling, 12 state endorsers also had Twitter accounts, none of which were labeled as state affiliated. In February 2022, however, Twitter labeled one of the pro-CCP YouTubers, Andy Boreham, who also works for the state-affiliated media outlet *Shanghai Daily*, as "China state-affiliated media," thus identifying him as part of China's official public diplomacy (Boreham, 2022). That means that in our study, his YouTube channel is included as a state endorser and his Twitter account as that of a Chinese official. It appears to be the first time Twitter has labeled a foreigner as part of China's state-affiliated media and shows how the platform tries to respond to the influence foreigners have in China's public diplomacy campaign.<sup>1</sup>

We used the YouTube Application Programming Interface (API) to collect the metadata from all the videos produced by 25 state-endorser channels with a total of 6,030 videos. The same method was used to identify and collect data from 19 Chinese state-affiliated media YouTube channels with 147,902 videos. For each video on these channels, starting from August 1, 2008, when the first video was posted, to February 20, 2022, we collected all the comments and replies, including the text, user ID, and date of each comment. In total, we collected 2,437,677 comments and replies under state-endorser videos and 2,973,241 under state-media videos.

For easier comparison, we calculated the average number of tweets and videos over time by dividing the total number of tweets by the total number of days for which tweets were recorded. For example, 155,883 tweets that contain state-media YouTube videos were posted over 2,921 days; this makes an average of 53 tweets that contain state-media videos per day.

To answer the question of whether the strategy of mobilizing individual YouTubers succeeded, we analyzed to what extent the state endorsers reach new audiences compared with state-affiliated media (RQ1). Because YouTube provides almost no data on audiences, we used comments under videos as an approximation of audience attention and compared the user IDs between the two sets in our sample. While this approach did not tell us about each user who watched the videos, it allowed us to study how individual users engaged with state-endorser videos compared with state-media videos, which we used to calculate audience overlap. Specifically, we were able to track if a user who commented under a state-endorser video did the same under a state-media video. Regardless of the actual content of the comments, which could be in agreement or disagreement with the viewpoints presented in the videos, this approach allowed us to

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<sup>1</sup> The exact date of labeling cannot be reconstructed because Twitter does not provide such information.

access the extent to which state endorsers engaged new audiences compared with state media. Our research ties in with previous studies that also used co-commentators to access audience attention and audience overlap on YouTube (Xu, Park, Kim, & Park, 2016). Namely, Rauchfleisch and Kaiser (2020) write that “commenting behavior is a suitable proxy for viewers” on YouTube (p. 380).

First, we collected the user IDs of all users who commented or replied to a comment under one of the videos in our sample and calculated the overlap between the two groups (Rauchfleisch & Kaiser, 2020). We calculated percentage overlap (PO) using  $P = \text{overlap}/\text{total} \times 100$ . For example, 1,193,800 unique users commented or replied under one of the videos in our sample with 84,697 unique users commenting or replying to *both* state-endorser and state-media videos at least once; hence,  $84,697/1,193,800 \times 100$  makes an overlap of 7%.

In the second step, we turned to Twitter to triangulate these results and also to learn more about the characteristics of the audiences. Following the method employed by Rauchfleisch, Vogler, and Eisenegger (2020), we searched the full Twitter archive for tweets containing a URL of one of the YouTube videos in our sample. This includes all tweets that contain YouTube videos, even those where the YouTube video is embedded, and the URL is no longer visible to regular users. We then calculated the overlap between users who tweeted both videos from state-media and state-endorser channels. To corroborate our results we introduced a threshold, selecting only the 20% most active users on both YouTube and Twitter, and recalculated the overlap. Finally, we calculated the percentage increase (PI) of audiences reached with China’s official narratives on Twitter and YouTube before and after state-endorser videos using  $P = \text{increase}/\text{original} \times 100$ . Here, “increase” is the number of unique users who only engage with state-endorser videos, not state-media videos. Based on the theoretical assumption that users always engage with state-media videos before state-endorser videos, we defined “original” as the total number of unique users who have engaged with a state-media video, including those who engage with both types of videos. In practice, some users may have engaged with state-endorser videos first, meaning the calculated percentage increase reflects the minimum, and the effective percentage increase is likely higher than that. The percentage increase on YouTube was calculated using  $P = 360,821/748,282 \times 100$ , and on Twitter it is  $P = 12,467/43,528 \times 100$ .

To learn more about the state endorsers’ audience (RQ2), we scrutinized the 20% most active users who had tweeted videos by state endorsers and state media, respectively, and compared their differences in follower counts and number of tweets containing videos from our sample. We also collected the last 1,000 tweets for each of the most active accounts to compare the language the state endorsers’ and state media’s top tweeters had primarily used, which could serve as an indicator for language community and to some extent region. The results should be understood as a proxy for the actual audiences’ characteristics based on some of the most active users. Users who watched the videos without sharing them on Twitter were likely generally less active on social media than the 20% most active users scrutinized here.

Finally, we compiled a list of Chinese official accounts on Twitter to better understand their role in promoting state-endorser and state-media videos (RQ3). According to Twitter’s policy on labeling, accounts of “Chinese officials” here include diplomats and embassy accounts, accounts of Foreign Ministry representatives, state media, state-affiliated media, as well as those of some high-level journalists working for these outlets (Twitter, 2020). Because Twitter (2022) had not made profile labels available in the API v2 at the time of writing,

we used a list of Chinese officials compiled by Schliebs and colleagues (2021) as seed accounts and scraped profile labels using automated Selenium software. After each round of scraping, we translated the labels into English, and for each Chinese official account labeled as "China government organization," "China state media," or "China state-affiliated media," we used the Twitter API to download followers. After three rounds of scraping and collecting followers between January and March 2022, we compiled a list of 401 Chinese officials, including some accounts without labels from the list by Schliebs and colleagues (2021). To our knowledge, it is the most complete list of Chinese official accounts on Twitter at the time of writing. We used the list to investigate what role Chinese officials play in promoting state-endorser videos compared with state-media videos. We encourage other researchers to use this list to study Chinese official communication on Twitter. The source code as well as all the data that were used and generated during this project are publicly available on the University of Hong Kong data hub (Brockling, Hu, & Fu, 2022).

### Results

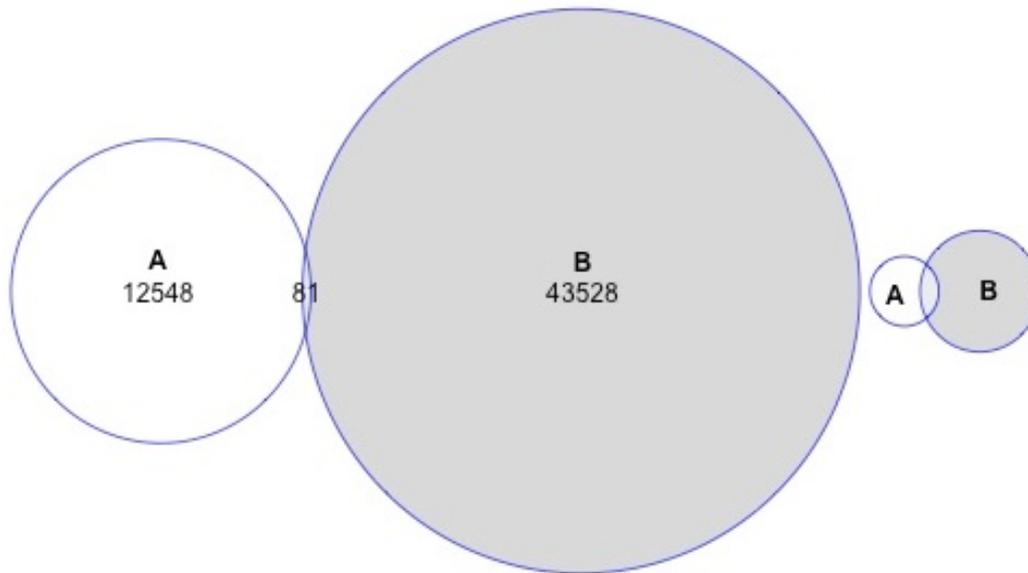
Our first inquiry is to examine whether state endorsers extend the reach of state media to new audiences (RQ1). Our empirical data analysis supports this claim: State-endorser videos reach out to a new audience, which has not been the engaged audience base of the Chinese state media on both YouTube and Twitter.



**Figure 1. Overlap of users who commented or replied under videos by state endorsers and state media on YouTube. Left side shows all users versus the right side, which shows the 20% most active users.**

*Note.* Euler plots are proportional. White circles show the number of users who commented or replied under state-endorser videos, and gray circles show the number of users who commented or replied under state-media videos.

On YouTube, the overlap of users who commented—or replied to comments—under videos by both state endorsers and state media is only 7% ( $n = 84,692$ ) of all users who commented or replied. This value stays fairly consistent when only comments (6.5%) or only replies to comments (7.7%) were analyzed, but it drops steeply to 0.18% ( $n = 375$ ) when only the top 20% of the most active users was analyzed, that is, those who commented—or replied to comments—in some cases 10,000 times (see Figure 1).



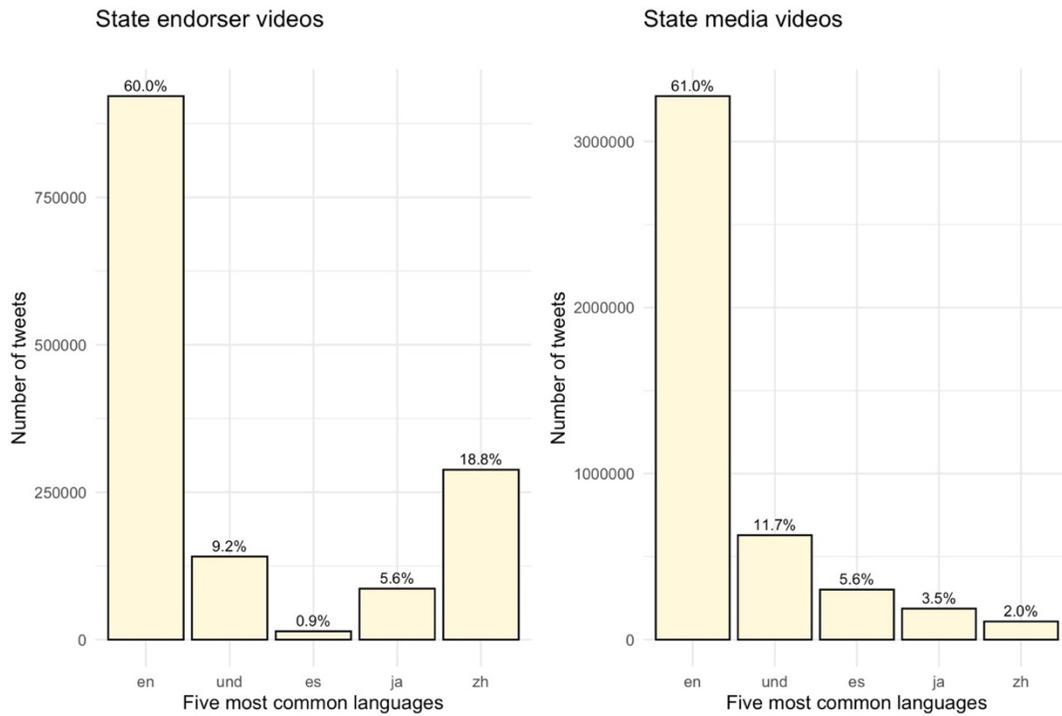
**Figure 2. Overlap of users who tweeted videos by state endorsers and state media. Left side shows all users versus the right side, which shows 20% most active users.**

*Note.* Euler plots are proportional. White circles show the number of users who tweeted state-endorser videos, and gray circles show the number of users who tweeted state-media videos.

On Twitter, the overlap of users who tweeted both a state-media and a state-endorser video at least once is even lower, only 3% ( $n = 1,733$ ) of all users, which includes 38 Chinese officials (see Figure 2). The overlap remains low at 5% ( $n = 567$ ) when only the 20% most active users was selected (see Figure 2). With the help of state endorsers, the reach of China's state narrative was extended by 48% on YouTube and 29% on Twitter.

### **Audience Characteristics**

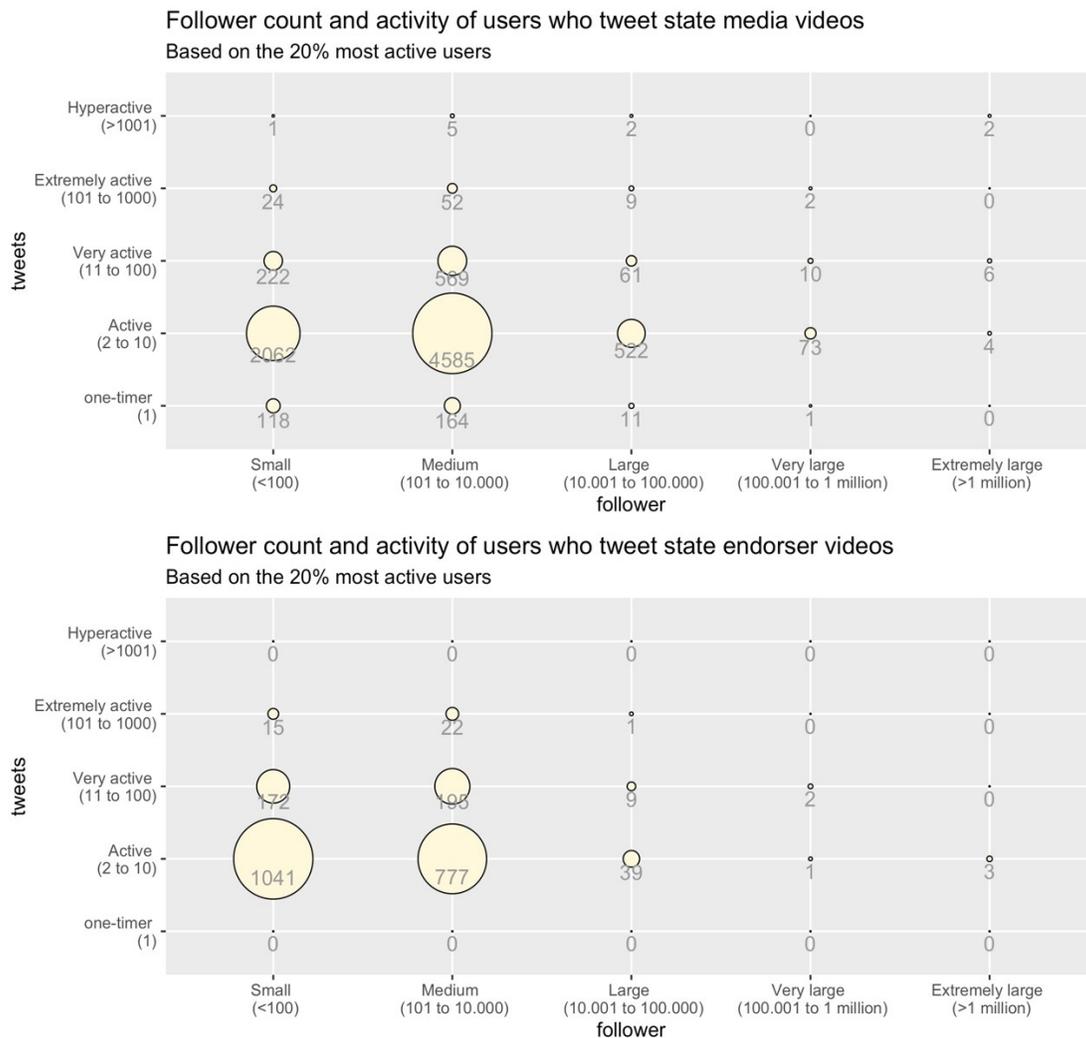
In RQ2 we compared the characteristics of the audience that engaged with state-endorser videos with those interacting with the state-media videos.



**Figure 3. Languages used by the 20% most active tweeters of state-media and state-endorser videos.**

*Note.* State-media videos received a considerably higher number of tweets in total. Percentages are based on the languages of the last 1,000 tweets of the 20% most active users.

Our analysis shows that the number of tweets depends on language. English is the most common language by far among Twitter users that posted state-endorser or state-media videos, which is not surprising given that the videos were predominantly in English. When comparing the languages in the last 1,000 tweets for the 20% most active users in both groups, we find that the biggest difference lies in the number of tweets in Spanish and Chinese (see Figure 3). Spanish was more widely used among users that tweeted videos by state media, and Chinese was more widely used among users that tweeted state-endorser videos. The differences in distribution are statistically significant ( $p < .00000000000000022$ ).



**Figure 4. Follower count and activity of 20% most active tweeters of state-endorser and state-media videos.**

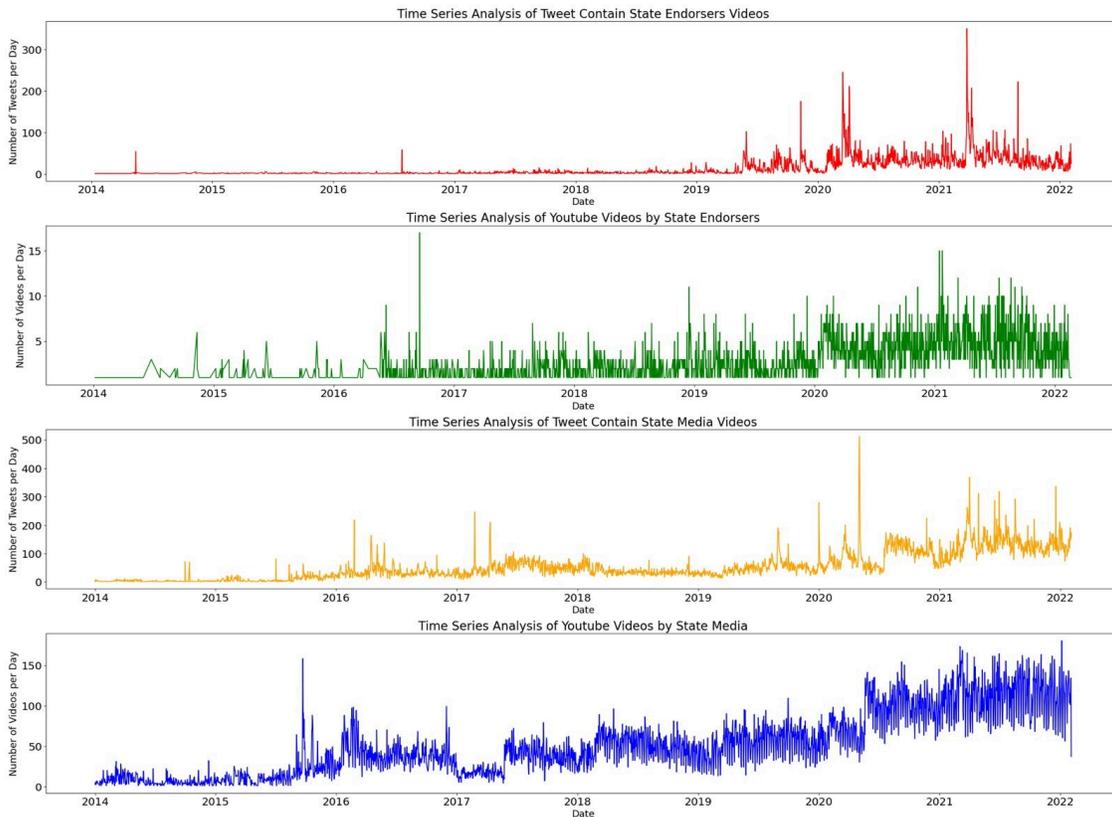
*Note.* The size of the yellow bubbles and the numbers inside indicate the number of Twitter users with the respective follower count and tweet activity.

We find that 90% of the most active accounts in both groups are small and medium-sized accounts with fewer than 10,000 followers (see Figure 4). Users that post state-endorser videos are approximately 50% small accounts and approximately 40% medium-sized accounts. In comparison, users that post state-media videos are approximately 62% medium-sized accounts and approximately 28% small accounts. The remaining 10% of users fall into the categories large accounts with 10,000 to 100,000 followers; very large accounts with 100,000 to 1 million followers; and extremely large accounts with more than 1 million followers. State-endorser videos and state-media videos receive 0.12% and 0.14% tweets, respectively,

from accounts with more than 1 million followers, but state media receive more tweets from large and very large accounts, approximately 8%, compared with only approximately 2% for state-endorser videos. For 9% of state endorser tweeters and approximately 2% of state-media tweeters, no information on follower count was available because the accounts were deleted or suspended.

Among the most active Twitter users in our data set, a typical user posted between one and 10 tweets containing state-media or state-endorser videos. Among users posting tweets with state-endorser videos, 83% posted between one and 10 times, compared with 85% among users posting tweets with state-media videos. Besides these typically active users, we also find very active users, who posted up to 100 tweets, and extremely active users who posted up to 1,000 tweets containing links to state-endorser or state-media videos. Among users posting state-endorser videos, approximately 16% fall into the category very active and approximately 2% ( $n = 39$ ) in the category extremely active. In comparison, only 10% of users who posted state-media videos fall into the category very active and approximately 1% ( $n = 87$ ) in the category extremely active though when comparing absolute numbers, significantly more users tweeted state-media videos than state-endorser videos. Among the most active users who posted state-media video tweets were also 10 hyperactive accounts, which posted more than 1,000 such tweets, and a considerable amount, approximately 3% of one-timers who only posted one tweet with a state-media video. None of the most active state-endorser video tweeters fall into those two categories (see Figure 4). The number of tweets and follower count are statistically independent of each other. The chi-squared test produced  $p$  values smaller than .05.

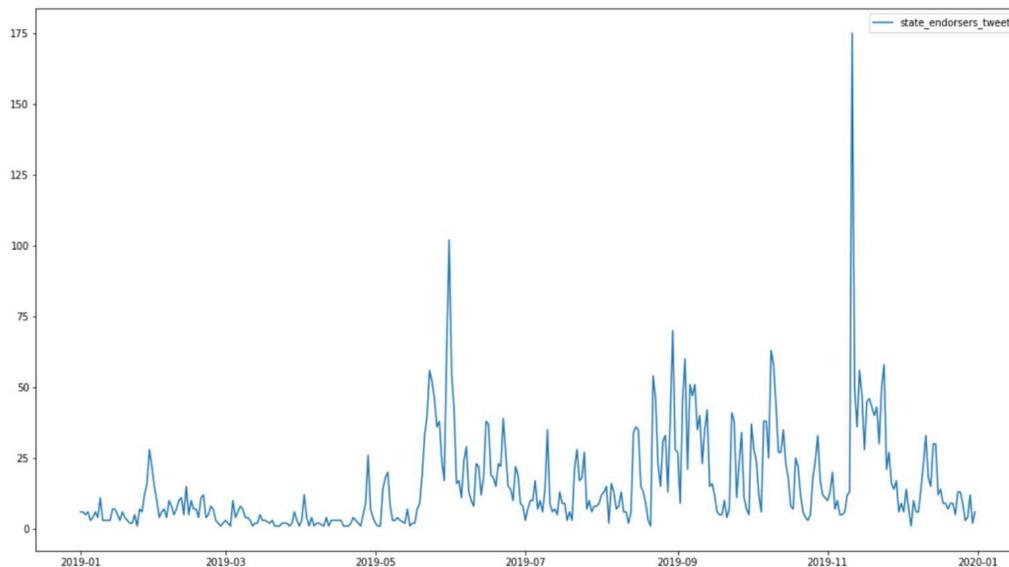
The topics of videos that users most engage with also serve as clues about their interests. State-endorser videos that received the most comments on YouTube were on politically sensitive topics; the top five videos were about China's great firewall, characterizing the Hong Kong protests as irrational chaos, supporting Taiwan as part of China, and accusing the Western media of lying about China. In comparison, the five state-media videos that received the most comments covered technology and entertainment, with only one political video, which was about the U.S. Capitol riots.



**Figure 5. Time series of the number of videos and tweets containing state-endorser videos and state-media videos from 2012 to 2022.**

Note. The four plots have the same x-axis but different y-axes to better illustrate the respective trends.

State endorsers posted an average of three videos per day ( $SD = 2.18$ ) on YouTube, compared with 49 videos per day ( $SD = 38.48$ ) by state media between 2014 and 2022 (see Figure 5). An outlier in the state-endorser data is the account JaYoeNation, which uploaded multiple videos on the day of account creation in 2016. The number of state-media videos uploaded to YouTube started rising in 2015 and accelerated over time. On Twitter, an average of 17 tweets per day ( $SD = 25.70$ ) contained state-endorser videos, compared with 53 tweets per day ( $SD = 50.24$ ) that contained state-media videos. Although state-endorser videos received consistently fewer tweets than state-media videos, we find a significant increase in the number of tweets containing state-endorser videos starting mid-2019 (see Figure 6). The increase correlates with the first large-scale anti-extradition bill protests in June 2019 in Hong Kong but could have also been triggered by other factors including organic follower growth. June 2019 was also the first time that a Chinese government official tweeted a video by one of the state endorsers.



**Figure 6. Time series of tweets containing state-endorser videos in 2019.**

### **Role of Chinese Government Officials**

Zhao Lijian was the first Chinese official to tweet a state-endorser video on a controversial topic.<sup>2</sup> On June 5, 2019, Zhao tweeted a video with the title "Huawei 5G LIES!" by Nathan Rich (2019). At the time of the tweet, Zhao held the prestigious post of ambassador at the Chinese Embassy in Pakistan and had around 186,000 followers on Twitter (Internet-Archive, 2019). Two months later, he became deputy director of the Foreign Ministry, and five months later other Chinese government and state-media accounts followed suit and started posting videos by state endorsers on foreign policy issues. It was the start of an ongoing series of tweets by Chinese officials promoting state-endorser videos.

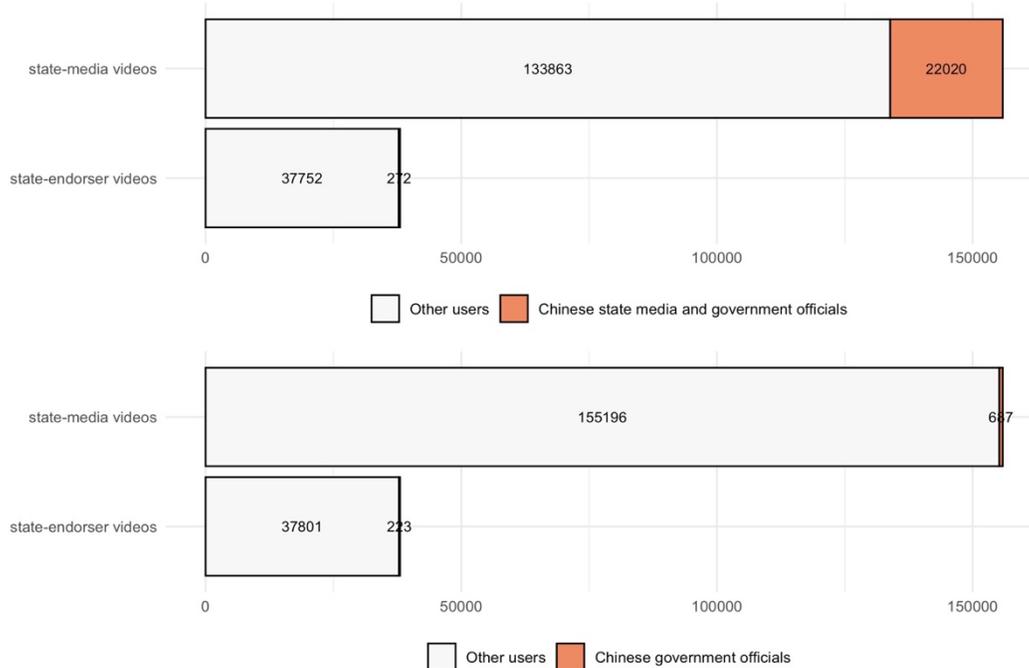
In the beginning, this trend appears to be driven by individuals. For instance, Wang Hao, the deputy editor-in-chief of *China Daily*, first posted a video by YouTuber Daniel Dumbrill on his personal account (Wang, 2019), and less than two weeks later, on November 23, 2019, the official *China Daily* account posted another video by the same YouTuber (China Daily, 2019). In both tweets, Dumbrill's videos are used to discredit Hong Kong's pro-democracy politicians and activists at a time when the 2019 protests in Hong Kong were at their height. The *China Daily* account posted the video at a particularly sensitive time, a day before the local elections for district councils, which saw a landslide victory for pan-democrats and a record voter turnout.

We find that Chinese officials use the state-endorser videos to underline their stance on current issues in China's foreign policy. In December 2019, when the U.S. House of Representatives adopted the

<sup>2</sup> Previously, only Yicai Global had posted a state endorser video in December 2017, which was about the life of food delivery workers in China.

Uyghur Human Rights Policy Act, calling for sanctions against China, the Chinese mission in the European Union (EU) tweeted a video by the YouTuber duo Lee and Oli Barrett, in which the Barretts deny human rights violations in Xinjiang (Barrett, 2019). With the start of the pandemic in 2020, the Chinese government and state-media accounts started posting state-endorser videos that support the CCP's official narrative on the spread of the COVID-19 pandemic.

In contrast, the use of state-media videos in tweets by Chinese officials developed much more slowly. Again, Zhao Lijian was the first individual Chinese official to tweet state-media videos in 2017. Until then, only Chinese state-media outlets and a couple of government institutions—the Chinese mission in the EU and the state council information office (SCIO)—had posted official videos like recordings of important speeches and celebrations of Chinese festivities. Zhao entered new territory when he posted a video showing Chinese Muslims preparing for Ramadan in May 2017 at the same time that China started detaining Muslims in Xinjiang on a large scale (China Central Television [CCTV], 2017). In February 2019, Zhao again posted videos suggesting the lives of Muslims in China go on undisturbed with one showing President Xi Jinping visiting a mosque, and the others showing foreign diplomats touring Xinjiang (CCTV, 2016). But it was not until the outbreak of the pandemic in 2020 that the number of government accounts posting state-media videos multiplied, and many of them started using state-media videos to support the official narrative around China's leading role in combating COVID-19.



**Figure 7. Share of Chinese state media and government officials tweeting state-media and state-endorser videos.**

Note. The upper panel shows the share of tweets by Chinese state media and individual government officials. The lower panel shows the share of tweets by individual government officials only, without state media.

We find that 0.7% of tweets ( $n = 272$ ) containing a state-endorser video came from Chinese state-affiliated accounts; in other words, 99.3% of tweets containing a state-endorser video came from regular users who were not openly affiliated with the Chinese state (see Figure 7). In comparison, a significant share of tweets containing state-media videos, 14% ( $n = 22,020$ ), came from Chinese state-affiliated accounts, mainly from the state-media outlets themselves (see Figure 7). Individual Chinese government accounts make up a small share of the total tweets containing state-media videos, as the lower panel in Figure 7 shows. They account for 0.4% of tweets containing state-media videos and 0.6% of tweets containing state-endorser videos.

A total of 75 unique state-affiliated accounts authored 272 tweets containing a state-endorser video. Among them, Zhang Heqing, who is generally very active on Twitter, was by far the most frequent tweeter of state-endorser videos, with 61 tweets. Other well-known state-affiliated accounts that tweeted state-endorser videos include Lijian Zhao and Hua Chunying, both spokespeople for China's Foreign Ministry. State media play a subordinate role in tweeting state-endorser videos. *China Focus* and *China Daily* were the most active ones with a handful of tweets each. In comparison, 116 individual Chinese government accounts shared state-media videos on Twitter. The vast majority of tweets containing state-media videos came from state-media accounts with CCTV and CCTV+ being the biggest ones, which posted more than 18,000 videos on Twitter. The tight timing of tweets suggests that state-media outlets employ automation to pull their own YouTube videos to Twitter. Among individual government accounts, Hua Chunying was the most active tweeter of state-media videos, with 93 tweets. Notably, both state-media and individual government officials tended to post either state-media or state-endorser videos, not both. Only 23 individual government officials and 16 state-media outlets posted videos from both groups. The Chinese news agency Xinhua and CCTV are among those that posted state-media videos but not state-endorser videos, which can be interpreted as maintaining neutrality.

### ***Inauthentic Accounts***

To test the possibility that parts of the tweets containing state-media and state-endorser content could have been posted by inauthentic accounts, we checked to see if there were any accounts in our data sample that had been identified by Twitter as part of Chinese state-led information operations. Twitter has ramped up its efforts to identify inauthentic accounts in the last years, often targeting specific (state-led) campaigns. Between August 2019 and December 2021, the company suspended 31,150 accounts as part of Chinese state information operations (Twitter, 2021). Twitter granted us access to the decoded data set for the purpose of this research. After matching the unique user IDs between the two data sets, we found no overlap between our data and the Chinese state information operation accounts identified by Twitter. That means none of the users that tweeted state-media or state-endorser videos appeared in the list of 31,150 accounts suspended by Twitter. However, we cannot preclude the possibility of bots in our data set. We found no evidence of inauthentic accounts, and it is less likely, given the extensive amounts of data that Twitter has available to identify state information operations and the large share of Chinese accounts suspended for this reason in the past. Still, we cannot rule out the possibility of inauthentic accounts among those that tweeted state-endorser and state-media videos.

### **Discussion**

Our study put forward the novel conceptual notion of "state endorser" to characterize a group of non-Chinese social media users without explicit state affiliation who enthusiastically subscribe to China's

state narrative and share their views with their followers. These state endorsers appear as non-state actors that serve the interest of the authoritarian state and have five key characteristics:

1. They primarily act as individuals with no explicit connection to the state although they may occasionally engage in a work relationship with state institutions, for example as researchers or consultants.
2. They are non-Chinese, which means they are perceived as more independent from the state and having greater freedom of speech than their Chinese counterparts.
3. Like brand endorsers, their credibility is based on their perceived expertise on China and their authenticity in the eyes of the audience. That means it is irrelevant whether they receive any financial or political incentives as long as the audience sees them as speaking their genuine opinion.
4. Non-state actors in China are generally restricted by state censorship in expressing opposing views. State endorsers enjoy an advantage in this closed-off and repressive environment of the authoritarian state where other authentic non-state actors are scarce.
5. In contrast to other non-state actors, state endorsers are sometimes highlighted and amplified by the state.

Our empirical analysis shows that pro-regime YouTubers can serve as fairly effective public diplomacy actors in extending the reach of the CCP official narrative to new audiences beyond state media despite publishing videos in the same language, at the same time, and in many cases, echoing similar narratives. The additional audience base is especially critical when considering the characteristics of the YouTube audience, who make up a highly segregated community with little overlap with China's state media and are likely to have no previous encounter with the country's propagandistic narratives. State endorsers offer Chinese propaganda a bridge to connect with this weakly tied community. Unlike Ingenhoff and colleagues (2021), who find that individual social media users have a higher reach than official accounts in Europe, China's state media still reach more users in absolute numbers than the state endorsers.

Given that like-minded people are likely to group together, we would expect to see a bigger overlap between users who engage with state-endorser and state-media videos on YouTube because the channels operate on shared beliefs and cover similar topics. The main difference between them is that state media are Chinese institutions with a clear agenda, and state endorsers are foreign individuals without an apparent connection with the state. This hints that the state endorser's audience possibly distrusts institutional media organizations and therefore does not engage with them, at least not regularly. A common denominator among the state-endorser channels is also that they accuse the Western media of lying. The feeling of general distrust toward Western media institutions could serve as an entry point and moment of shared truth between people who find media coverage of China unfair or biased and the state endorsers. Our findings only show the reaching out of Chinese narratives to this group of social media users but do not suggest that the users are convinced or start supporting China. Future research could investigate whether viewers with a conspiracy mentality are more likely to watch pro-CCP YouTubers, and if consuming state-endorser videos leads to a change in attitude toward Chinese state media or online engagement practices with pro-China messages.

Our analysis also reveals that the profile of the most actively engaged users of state-endorser videos is similar to that of the state-media videos in terms of language, follower count, and activity. But the most popular videos in terms of the number of comments indicate that the audience follows state endorsers *because* of their political content, not despite it, whereas Chinese state-media videos are most successful in covering entertainment and technology topics.

Our analysis further indicates that Zhao Lijian was the "innovator" among all Chinese government officials to use YouTubers to support controversial statements and address politically sensitive issues on Twitter in mid-2019 (Rogers, 2003). Zhao's online endorsement seemed to have departed from the practices of typical foreign affairs officers who often behave diplomatically in the public domain. One of the "early adopters" was Wang Hao, the deputy editor-in-chief of the *China Daily*. After Zhao was promoted to deputy director of the Foreign Ministry, the practice of tweeting state-endorser videos was diffused to other government officials and state media. In that sense, the state endorsers also mark a turning point in China's public diplomacy policy. As previous research has suggested, one key assertive external communication strategy under Xi Jinping is a change in tone, from "Panda" to "Wolf Warrior," especially toward the United States (Martin, 2021, p. 197). Our analysis provides empirical support that Chinese officials have also loosened their grip: Using state-endorser videos for public diplomacy means helping these channels to prominence without being in control of future content. From the perspective of the Chinese leadership, the state endorsers fill the lack of non-state actors in digitalized public diplomacy, but state use of their voices also means giving up full control of external communication.

To our knowledge, this is the first study of foreign YouTubers within China's public diplomacy. It has a few limitations. For the purpose of comparability, we only included channels that posted videos predominantly in English. We used comments under videos and tweets as a proxy for audience attention because this was the only user data available on YouTube. That means we relied on the most engaged users as a proxy for the total audience. Still, this approach is deemed appropriate because it allows us to study the ways in which individual users engaged with state-endorser videos compared with state-media videos and has been used in previous studies to study audience overlap among YouTube channels. As with all studies that analyze social media, we benefit from large-scale, long-term, and very recent data but encounter difficulties when verifying the authenticity of millions of comments and tweets. While we cannot completely preclude bot activity in the tweets and comments, we have verified that none of the accounts in our data set are part of the suspended accounts identified by Twitter as part of Chinese state-led information operations in the last three years.

### Conclusion

For social media platforms and regulators, the state endorsers pose a new challenge. YouTube and Twitter have developed profile labels that inform users of state affiliations and allow them to place content they are seeing in context. But unless state endorsers officially work for state media, these labels do not fit. In classic public diplomacy terminology, the pro-CCP YouTubers are merely considered as non-state actors, a term that suggests independence. Going forward, we propose the term "state endorser" to label foreign non-state actors that are used by Chinese officials for public diplomacy.

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