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SUBTITLING DISINFORMATION NARRATIVES AROUND COVID-19

'Foreign' vlogging in the construction of digital nationalism in Chinese social media

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As the COVID-19 pandemic gained a foothold during the spring of 2020, governments across the world found themselves grappling with difficult policy choices under intense public scrutiny. Amid the mounting death toll and heightened concerns over the economic impact of successive lockdowns, Donald Trump's administration attempted to deflect criticism by denouncing China for its failings in the initial management of the outbreak (Singh et al. 2020) – a strategy bolstered by American mainstream media through their concerted effort to 'name, blame and shame' the Asian superpower for spreading the virus (Jia and Lu 2021). This state of affairs was mirrored in China, where social media contributed to disseminating and amplifying Chinese officials' claims that the pandemic had been caused by a US military germ warfare programme (Winter 2020). Mainstream and social media thus became the battlefield on which the US and China continue to clash as they struggle to counter negative perceptions of their handling of the initial outbreak, and strive to retain and strengthen their status as global players (Conley Tyler 2021; Davidson 2021).

Allegations of China's engagement in disinformation campaigns,¹ including those addressing the circulation of narratives around the origin of COVID-19, have become a staple of Western media reportage and are now subject to growing journalistic and scholarly scrutiny. In a recent report published by the Australian Strategic Policy Institute, Zhang et al. (2021) argue that disinformation campaigns are the Chinese Communist Party's preferred strategy to discredit critical reporting – whether it focuses on what Western media refer to as the 'Xinjiang's internment camps' or the origin of the Coronavirus pandemic, to give but two examples. In Zhang et al.'s view, these disinformation campaigns set out to promote hypotheses and scenarios intended to "confuse investigative work" and "smear and discredit the organizations and individuals involved in that reporting and research" (ibid.:1–2). The transatlantic advocacy group Alliance for Securing Democracy, on the other hand, argues that China's aims in launching social media offensives against critical news outlets or research institutes are to capitalize on populist sentiment online – often by remediating and repurposing content from Russian state-backed media outlets² – and to undermine democratic regimes and values in the US and Europe (Alliance for Securing Democracy n.d.).

The notion of narrative features prominently in much Western reporting and academic research on the subject. China's reported involvement in digital disinformation initiatives has been variously characterized as a means of "aggressive promotion of its narratives" (Shih 2021) and an attempt to "control narratives around key public issues [and] assert the CCP's [Chinese Communist Party's] discourse power" (Zhang et al. 2021:2). Of particular importance, according to Western news outlets, is the widening range of Chinese actors being mobilized by the Chinese Government to advance its narratives (Tang 2021). State media, for example, have long supported the Government's strategy by "actively supplying news ... to developing nations and even western countries to try to change the narrative [about China's place in the international community] worldwide" (ibid.). Likewise, diplomats and Chinese Communist Party officials have been playing an increasingly active role in waging social media campaigns, by posting content on Western social media platforms to guide and influence opinions on sensitive affairs within their host communities (Scott 2020). This top-down approach to the management of national mediascapes in non-democratic countries is now being complemented by a bottom-up strategy, whereby digitally empowered audiences are deployed to advance official narratives on social media. Planting sympathetic, pro-regime views in user comment sections or incentivizing the production and distribution of social media content by committed patriots are two ways in which authoritarian states are attempting to "harness the process of mediatisation [of politics] to their advantage" (Tolz et al. 2020:4).

China's recruitment of Western influencers to advance the country's narratives and promote official discourses is reportedly the latest development under the Chinese Communist Party's evolving strategy to forge and manage consensus within a globally networked environment (Parker 2021). Of particular note is the enlisting of British and American vloggers who have managed to attract large communities of Chinese followers by defending China against criticism from the West. As digital disinformation experts have noted, the endorsement of China's official stance by Western social media influencers acting as "fellow travellers" (Michael 2019:78)³ resonates very strongly with domestic netizens, who are led to "believe the Chinese Community Party is admired by international audiences" (Parker 2021). As is also the case with other fellow travellers examined in the literature (Bullock and Trombley 1999), Western influencers producing media content commissioned by China's authorities publicly challenge official discourses that circulate in their native geopolitical spaces and align themselves with the Asian superpower's narratives. But while fellow travellers are often recruited by authoritarian countries to undermine the Euro-American world order and influence public opinion in democratic societies (Michael 2019), the work of foreign influencers examined in this chapter is intended to consolidate Chinese self-identity and a sense of national pride.

As these influencers' proficiency in Mandarin is usually lacking or limited, subtitling is crucial to ensure that their vlogs are widely watched and appreciated by Chinese audiences. This chapter explores the contribution that subtitled vlogs on COVID-19 posted by Western influencers make to the projection of China's strategic narratives around the origins and management of the initial outbreak of the pandemic within the idiosyncratic attentional regime of Chinese social media. Through their vlogs, Western influencers expose Chinese social media users to selected aspects of hostile Western narratives, which are then dissected, critiqued and neutralized. Effectively, Western influencers' vlogs act as a mechanism of ontological optimization, mobilization and immunization against foreign narratives. In an

ecosystem characterized by restricted access to foreign media content, and in the absence of overt domestic debate around national strategic narratives, I will argue, the posting of subtitled vlogs by Western influencers ultimately enables the formation of affectively compliant audiences.

Previous work (Pérez-González 2014, 2017) has explored the dynamics of mutual recognition between prosumers and their audiences in networked subtitling communities. These studies have revealed the role that subtitling plays in forging affective structures of online sociality. Indeed, the production and consumption of subtitles in these virtual, geographically dispersed networks – where participating individuals negotiate and mobilize various aspects of their identity – enable processes of affective priming and engagement that exceed the mere flow of information in the “thin band of consciousness we now call cognition” and incorporate semiconscious flows of sensations “moving through the bodies” of those participating in the activities of the community (Thrift 2007:236). As will be explored below, neither these affective flows nor the mobilizing force that subtitling represents are confined to the subtitled content itself. Analysing viewer comments on social media, for example, has been found to yield important insights into the reception of media content through subtitling (Pérez-González 2016; Lee 2021). To explore the proliferation of nationalist discourses articulated within and around these vlogs and gain a better understanding of netizens’ involvement in China’s digital nation-building project, this chapter therefore draws on a case study involving the analysis of *danmu* (bullet comments) posted by viewers in response to a vlog available on the video-sharing platform Bilibili.

Strategic narratives: global versus domestic ecologies of attention

Although references to narratives in the body of media reports cited in the previous section draw on the everyday or lay sense of the term, the concept of strategic narratives has been productively deployed by international relations scholars interested in the role played by institutional communication and discourses as an important extension of material power in the context of global politics. Miskimmon et al. (2014:176) define strategic narratives as “a means for political actors to construct a shared meaning of the past, present and future of international relations in order to shape the opinions and behaviour of actors at home and overseas”. Seen through this framework, the enrolment of foreign vloggers by China’s government as reported in Western media can be construed as an attempt to stage expressions of praise from outside China for the Chinese Communist Party’s handling of the COVID-19 pandemic and, more generally, to reshape the discursive environment to the government’s advantage. Through the mobilization of these vlogged foreign narratives, domestic audiences in China are provided with new sensemaking devices (Miskimmon et al. 2017) to understand and engage with the world around them. The centrality of communication in the ontological and epistemological processes through which networked communities tell and are told about their shared reality means that it enables the forging of shared meanings about China’s place on the global scene. Narratives therefore act as “an overall heuristic to interpret the world” (Miskimmon et al. 2021:8) and inform constructions of political identity that very large sections of Chinese society are happy to subscribe to and align with.

In non-authoritarian societies, users of global social media platforms are exposed to a wide range of strategic narratives circulating in their environment and encounter abundant opportunities to reason about and renegotiate the narratives in which they are embedded –

both the ones they subscribe to and those that they choose to contest. Therefore, in producing content to advance strategic narratives on Western social media platforms, overcoming the areas of vulnerability inherent in these heuristics is paramount. The fact that connectivity in global social media is both extensive (it allows a very large and geographically dispersed community to express approval or dissent with a given narrative) and intensive (the dematerialization of digital communication accelerates the processes of collective deliberation) represents a major threat to the power of strategic narratives (Roselle et al. 2014). Without referring specifically to these sensemaking devices, Cronin (2017) accounts for the impact of enhanced connectivity in terms of the tension between cyberspace and cybertime. Digitization, Cronin argues, has brought about the deterritorialization of cyberspace and enabled the instantaneity of networked communication. As more people are able to access the tools and acquire the degree of literacy required to participate in the public digital sphere, space becomes an infinite resource. By contrast, cybertime, understood as “the finite, organic, physical elaboration of information” remains bound by the constraints of materiality, and hence “slows down the operations of our mind as it seeks to invest information with effective forms of meaning” (ibid.). For a strategic narrative to be successful, audiences must be able to recognize the relevant actors and their associated or implied traits; identify the setting(s) of the narrative, complete with the premises and rationale motivating the choice of space; and make sense of the temporal sequencing of events. Temporality may therefore pose a significant challenge to the integrity of strategic narratives and undermine the mid- and long-term explanatory power of these sensemaking devices. Indeed, social, political and historical developments often make it necessary to renegotiate the meaning of such events if/when views that were collectively forged in the past become contentious sites of debate or struggle again (Lams 2018; van Noort 2020).

The idiosyncrasy of China’s media ecology, however, goes a long way towards countering the vulnerability of the strategic narratives that circulate within the country’s social media platforms. As is also the case in other authoritarian regimes (Tolz et al. 2020), the increasing mediatization of Chinese politics is indicative of the average netizen’s growing capacity to evade governmental control (Zou 2021). Still, Chinese platforms remain relatively disconnected from the circuitry of the global public sphere. Designed to ensure that communication flows within “discrete media spaces demarcated largely by national boundaries” (Zou 2021:529), Chinese social media remain more firmly aligned with traditional media scripts and official narratives than their global counterparts (Schneider 2018; Khalil 2020). An important reason for this is that the top-down control of narrative flows is complemented by the prevalence of self-regulation among Chinese netizens, whose posting activity is “closely watched by the party-state authority to monitor and weed out potentially subversive content” (Han 2021:439). In the Chinese digital mediascape, the demands placed by the attentional economy of cybertime on global social media are thus compounded by additional constraints pertaining to the country’s unique ecology of attention (Citton 2017). These may manifest themselves as overt censorship, but also in the form of sophisticated and opaque mechanisms designed to condition netizens’ attention and their standards of plausibility or verisimilitude.⁴ So while extensive connectivity is also central to Chinese platforms, insofar as they bring together members of one of the largest global linguacultures, restricted access to foreign news outlets and global social media platforms impairs intensive connectivity, ultimately limiting the spectrum of views represented within the country’s networked communities. In light of the obstacles that narratives circulating in global social

media have to overcome to penetrate this closed-off ecosystem, the potential for dissent with dominant Chinese narratives is more limited, as is the likelihood of entrenched narratives being disrupted by temporality (i.e. having to be renegotiated if/when media content endorsing competing narratives emerges).

Beyond methodological elitism

In their introduction to a special issue of *Politics* on everyday narratives in world politics, Stanley and Jackson (2016) acknowledge that international relations scholarship has largely focused on elite actors and advocate the need to move beyond the current ‘methodological elitism’ to address a number of underexplored concerns, namely “[h]ow is political order and transformation justified and challenged by those without formal or official power? To what extent do those outside the corridors of power obey or accept the political justifications of elites? And how are the perimeters of political possibility reproduced or resisted in the mundane practices of everyday life?” (ibid.:24). This chapter adopts a non-elitist approach and examines how non-elite Chinese audiences respond to subtitled vlogs projecting narratives that aim to counter accusations of negligence against China in its handling of the COVID-19 outbreak and to mobilize discontent against the US.

As already explained, the Chinese Communist Party’s official line is more likely to meet with acquiescence than resistance in Chinese social media. However, the adoption of a non-elitist methodological approach should yield interesting insights into the extent to which non-elites deliberate on or, alternatively, largely absorb the narratives that the Chinese government circulates in response to accusations of negligence in its handling of the COVID-19 pandemic. Writing prior to the advent of the digital era, Hall et al. noted that “conversations between neighbours, discussion at street-corners or in the pub, rumour, gossip, speculation” (1979:129) – and the iterations of negotiation and repositioning they entail – are particularly effective in securing acquiescence with elite discourses. In the context of Chinese digital culture, the dynamics of social media conversations provide snapshots of how power relations play out in mundane debates among non-elite members of society. Although these are not able to force changes in the official line of non-elected governments, studying the reception of strategic narratives that are ontologically primed for distribution within social media should enable a more nuanced understanding of how vernacular agency is exercised in participatory settings.

In what follows I focus on the reception by Chinese netizens of a subtitled vlog produced by China-based social media influencer Nathan Rich and posted on the Chinese video-sharing website Bilibili. Featuring Rich’s commentary on a timeline of events pointing to a potential COVID-19 cover-up on the part of the US, this vlog is examined to explore how translated media content conditions the attention field of vlog viewers and influences their collective standards of plausibility and verisimilitude, as evidenced by the *danmu* comments they post on the platform.

Nathan Rich, aka the ‘Hotpot King’

Nathan Rich’s connection with China is a good example of a charismatic influencer being recruited and paid to produce vlogs in support of non-democratic regimes. As Fedor and Fredheim note (2017:168), this form of “anti-Westernism, augmented with a dose of

conspiracy” seeks to “inspire and mobilize” netizens based in authoritarian countries to serve as “agents of influence” in disinformation initiatives. While Nathan Rich’s IMDb webpage⁵ focuses primarily on his family background and past experience in technical roles within the American film industry, Wikipedia reports as follows:

Since moving to China, Rich has started a video blog sympathetic to the People’s Republic of China. Among the views he holds are that those who had taken part in the Hong Kong protests were “terrorists” and “right-wing”, and that Taiwan was an integral part of China and could therefore not be a state. He has also commented on the China–United States trade war and China’s handling of the coronavirus epidemic.⁶

Media reporting on Rich varies in terms of the way his work is presented to readers. Writing for *Taiwan News*, Everington (2020) characterizes Rich as a “China propagandist” with a criminal record who plays “the part of the model foreigner who really understands China” and promotes “conspiracy theories that the coronavirus started in America”. By contrast, in their article for *Global Times*, a daily tabloid closely aligned with the Chinese Communist Party, Bi and Bai (2020) present Rich as “an American political commentator currently living in Beijing”, most of whose vlogs aim to “debunk the anti-China conspiracy theories and malicious rhetoric by Western media and officials”. In trying to gain a better understanding of Nathan Rich’s narrative affiliation, it is worth bearing in mind that, according to the vlogger’s own website,⁷ Rich was the recipient in 2020 of the ‘Touching China’ Award conferred by CCTV, China’s state-controlled broadcaster, and the ‘Top 10 Overseas Influencers’ Award given by the Chinese microblogging platform Weibo. Although there is certainly nothing objectionable about these achievements, Rich’s connections with influential outlets in China’s media marketplace should not be overlooked.

Nathan Rich maintains a healthy presence on global social media platforms. Of particular relevance for the purposes of this chapter is the fact that his YouTube channel “has amassed 475,000 subscribers [494,000 at the time of writing], many of whom are Chinese, no small feat considering that the platform has been blocked in the communist country since 2007” (Everington 2020).⁸ This large YouTube following has been acquired despite the fact that, according to Rich, YouTube is “aggressively demonetizing” his videos, resulting in the number of views “getting locked and reduced”, as well as ‘likes’ and subscriptions being removed (Rich n.d.). Explicitly attributing YouTube’s actions to the “controversial” nature of the topics he explores in his vlogs (ibid.), he asks his followers for various types of support in order to be able to “fight back”. Apart from retaining a high level of visibility as a vlogger, increasing the size of his following is also important for financial reasons, as the assistance provided by the Chinese government is commensurate with the size of the audiences that foreign influencers are able to garner outside China (Lu 2020).

Unsurprisingly, given the nature and orientation of his work, Rich is also present on all the major Chinese social media platforms. Often referred to as China’s YouTube, Bilibili is a video-sharing platform; at the end of December 2020, it catered for 202 million users (Bilibili 2021) – a large proportion of whom, including the Communist Youth League of China, double up as creators of media content (Liao 2020). Most of the material published in English on Rich’s YouTube channel is also available with bilingual English/Mandarin subtitles on his Bilibili ‘space’,⁹ which at the time of writing drew one and a half million ‘fans’. Significantly, Nathan Rich is one of the few foreign vloggers who “have been given

the green light to use the platform” to publish political commentary on Bilibili, which provides him with “unprecedented reach to Chinese audiences” (Lu 2020). As will be elaborated in the section on analysing vectors of negative contagion on Bilibili, the bilingual subtitles in English and Mandarin that feature in his Bilibili vlogs facilitate the spread of pro-China narratives among domestic social media audiences and the formation of a virtual community of netizens with like-minded dispositions and traversed by shared affectivity.

Danmu

Of particular relevance to this study is Bilibili’s *danmu*-posting facility.¹⁰ The terms *danmu* or *danmaku* designate video-overlay live comments generated by viewers of media content in various settings, including video-sharing platforms. The number of ‘barrage’ or ‘bullet’ comments superimposed on the video image, which travel from the right to the left margin of the screen, can increase significantly during climatic moments, effectively creating ‘bullet curtains’ that block the image. Described as a “hypertextual audiencing tool” (Chen 2020:321) that co-exists and interacts with standard subtitles, traditional off-screen comments and other non-verbal semiotic resources, *danmu* have been shown to enable the formation of virtual communities of interest and have ushered in new practices of online deliberation. As reported in the literature (Djamasbi et al. 2016; Dwyer 2017; Chen 2020; Yue 2020), *danmu* have significantly contributed to the emergence of vernacular fan discourses around the anime, comic, game and novel culture in China and to the formation of other sites and expressions of counter-culture and dissent.

This form of participatory spectacle (Androutsopoulos 2013) or textual intensification (Dwyer 2017), as *danmu* have been characterized in the literature, fosters affective flows among members of virtual communities wishing to exercise their vernacular agency in response to the content with which they are presented. Although *danmu*-mediated spectatorial experiences are largely solitary and asynchronous (Yue 2000), 76% of participants in a study on commenting activities online reported feeling “more social and connected to other viewers” when posting and reading *danmu* on screen (Djamasbi et al. 2016:654). In the remainder of this chapter, I focus on the reception of a specific vlog posted by Nathan Rich on his Bilibili space, conduct a content analysis of the *danmu* generated by viewers of this video and examine how non-elite actors engage with the strategic narratives to which they are exposed.

Analysing vectors of narrative contagion on Bilibili

This section reports on the analysis of the body of 3,200 *danmu* posted by the end of November 2020 in response to a vlog published by Nathan Rich on 17 March 2020 and entitled ‘Does the new coronavirus originate in the United States? Is this statement a conspiracy theory or a reasonable suspicion?’.¹¹ With almost 7 million views and 40,000 *danmu* posted at the time of writing, this vlog is by far the most popular among the 102 available on Rich’s Bilibili space. The *danmu* posted on this vlog were downloaded onto a spreadsheet using a dedicated software application.¹²

The vlog begins with a montage of brief extracts from news programmes broadcast on US TV channels presented in quick succession. These extracts – which report on the much higher-than-normal incidence of flu in the US in the autumn of 2019, the abrupt shutdown

of an army’s germ lab and the health emergency declared by America’s Center for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) in connection with episodes of serious lung disease caused by e-cigarettes – become the backdrop for the narrative Rich constructs in the remainder of the vlog. The narrative is supported by a graphic timeline panel projected behind the vlogger, where the viewer’s attention is drawn to a number of selected events, interspersed with photographs and short video clips. Although Rich’s compilation of news clips and the graphic timeline do not feature any textual transfer from English into Mandarin, his choice of the montage format is consistent with the “bricolage of exotic texts and visuals” from well-known foreign outlets that is often used in translated COVID-19 disinformation campaigns (Zou 2021:527), where source texts are often “misrepresented to fit into the conspiracy theory” (ibid.:525).

After decrying the proliferation of conspiracy theories on the origin of the COVID-19 pandemic, Rich proceeds to examine the “evidence” supporting the “widely held view” that it was caused by an accident in an American military research facility. According to this version of events, American researchers are supposed to have failed to follow containment protocols while conducting experiments with coronaviruses (SARS-COV and MERS) on animals. This theory holds that, instead of reporting the accident, CDC chose to shut down the lab and circulate fake news to conceal the outbreak – for example, by attributing the high number of lung disease cases to the combined effect of a severe bout of flu and the vaping habits of Americans. Although the structure of the vlog explicitly foregrounds Rich’s emplotting of events as a coherent narrative to condition his audience’s attention, the vlogger concludes that there is not sufficient evidence to support the failed experiment theory, not least because of CDC’s opaque management of what went on in the research lab. The influencer finishes by thanking his viewers in Chinese (谢谢) and declaring that ‘it’s OK to love China’.

On the surface, the vlog chosen as my case study projects an issue narrative, one of the three types of strategic narratives put forward by international relations scholars. By interrogating available ‘evidence’ on the origins and handling of the COVID-19 outbreak, this issue narrative “set[s] governmental actions in a context, with an explanation of who the important actors are ... [and] what the conflict or issue is” (Roselle et al. 2014:76). As the *danmu* featuring in examples 1–4 illustrate,¹³ a large number of viewers commenting on Rich’s subtitled vlog choose to express their admiration for his capacity to identify the main actors and emplot the key events in this narrative; as the examples show, they praise Rich’s capacity to join the dots between what less astute analysts would have regarded as unrelated actors and events, without any connection with the accident that released the virus.

1	00:00.0	00:10.5	卧槽, 带预言家	WTF, big seer.
2	00:00.3	00:13.3	大 预 言 家	BIG SEER.
3	00:01.5	00:05.5	《大 预 言 家 》	“BIG SEER”.
4	00:02.1	00:13.1	大预言家大预言家	Big seer, big seer.

Specifically, Rich is portrayed as the ‘Seer’, one of the character roles in *The Werewolves of Millers Hollow* game,¹⁴ in recognition of his capacity to unveil the true identity of werewolves posing as villagers – or, in the context of the video, his ability to discover what really happened in the American military research facility, drawing on his deductive skills. As is also the case with the seers in the game (they are likely to be murdered

by werewolves, who wish to remain unidentified and hence retain their capacity to kill fellow villagers), an attempt on Rich's life is bound to be made to prevent further revelations. The similarities between the seer's and Rich's roles are explicitly foregrounded in examples 5–7.

5	00:01.1	00:10.8	赶紧刀了	Kill [him] with a knife, quick.
6	00:03.1	00:12.8	小心被刀	Be careful not to be killed with a knife.
7	00:11.5	00:23.0	预言家不行今晚刀了	The seer has to be killed with a knife tonight if there is no other way around.

Although most of these remarks concerning the inevitability of Rich's death seem to be primarily made tongue-in-cheek, many viewers show genuine concern about Rich's physical safety. In exhorting fellow viewers to provide collective protection for the seer by figuratively weaving an armour of *danmu* around him, these audience members imply that Rich may at some point become the target of retaliatory action on account of his work (see, for instance, examples 8–14). As illustrated in examples 15–19, some viewers go further in expressing their concerns. Their *danmu* explicitly attribute those potential retaliatory operations to American national security agencies, and hence acknowledge the US's role as a key actor in Rich's narrative:

8	00:09.3	00:17.7	保护	Protect.
9	00:11.2	00:21.2	加大力度保护	Protect [the vlogger] stronger.
10	00:11.4	00:21.4	保护保护!!	Protect, protect!!
11	00:16.8	00:26.4	保护大王	Protect the King.
12	00:22.1	00:31.8	保护友军	Protect [our] ally.
13	00:31.5	00:44.5	保护预言家, 请注意安全!	Protect the seer. Please be safe!
14	00:54.7	01:06.2	你一定要保护好自己	You must protect yourself well.
15	00:06.4	00:19.4	兄弟萌把保护刷起来! 火锅大王一定要小心 CIA!	Bros, post "protect" [on the screen]! The Hot Pot King must be careful of the CIA!
16	02:36.5	02:49.5	注意安全啊哥们, 小心点美国政府	Be careful, bro, of the American government.
17	03:12.8	03:25.8	这位大哥已经被 CIA 和 FBI 盯上了!	This bro has been followed by the CIA and FBI!
18	07:02.8	07:13.3	真不怕被暗杀吗	Are you really not afraid of being assassinated?
19	07:06.4	07:19.4	还好美国比较开放, 可以随意指点不然 up 主就危了	Fortunately, the US is relatively open, otherwise the uploader would be in danger because of such frank talk.

The selection of *danmu* in examples 20–27 is indicative of the extent to which Rich has succeeded in conditioning his audience's attention. Although the final part of the vlog features the vlogger's acknowledgement that the US's negligence in the accidental release of the COVID-19 virus cannot be demonstrated, his viewers choose to align themselves with the narrative that Rich painstakingly elaborates earlier in the video. As reflected in his viewers' responses, Rich's emplotment of the events presented in this vlog attributes the responsibility for the global transmission of the virus firmly to the US:

20	00:00.0	00:13.0	【谨防美国继续释放其他病毒!】	Beware that the US may continue to release other viruses!
21	00:03.1	00:14.1	美国才是混乱根源	America is the source of chaos.
22	00:09.6	00:19.3	就是美国	It is America.
23	00:35.0	00:48.0	美国以前的流感就是试验品	The previous flu [season] in the US was a test.
24	00:37.5	00:47.2	美国病毒	American virus.
25	00:48.7	01:00.2	美国不死, 大难不已	There will be countless big troubles until the US is finished.
26	02:28.3	02:41.3	让全世界看到美国才是真正的魔鬼	Let the whole world know that the US is the real evil.
27	04:30.5	04:43.5	美国想干嘛? 美国整天搞这些是想一直保持世界霸主的地位。当然或者想侵略	What does the US want to do? The US does this all day long because it wants to maintain its hegemony. Of course, or it wants to invade.

As this set of examples show, the issue narrative advanced in Rich's vlog intersects with an international system narrative – another of the categories included in Roselle et al.'s (2014) typology of strategic narratives – inscribed in the same video. *Danmu* 20–27 provide ample evidence of how Rich's viewers perceive the structure and dynamics of the world order and, in line with the results of other studies on disinformation campaigns around COVID-19 (Zou 2021), highlight the capacity of international system narratives to “mobilize people's discontent towards the U.S. administration” and tap into “pre-existing popular hostility towards the Western hegemony as well as the vehement popular demand to defend China from external biases and criticisms” (ibid.:529).

As the proponents of the taxonomy postulate, strategic narratives are often inextricably linked, whether they belong to the same or a different type. My analysis of *danmu* published in response to Rich's vlog reveals that a third type of strategic narrative comes into play ten months after the video was originally posted. Following the airing of a CCTV documentary supporting the hypothesis that the COVID-19 virus was released by accident within an American military research facility, a large number of new *danmu* is posted by audience members. The fact that the emplotment of events underpinning the state broadcaster's narrative is very similar to the assembly of facts woven into Rich's vlog almost one year earlier is seen by many viewers as an endorsement of the influencer's ‘theory’ by China's government and an indication that Rich's stance is aligned with China's goals. Indeed, the extent to which Rich's vlog is able to feed on nationalist emotions reveals the contribution that a national narrative, the third type in the typology of strategic narratives, makes to the vlog's overall heuristic force as a sensemaking device.

As the selection of comments reproduced as examples 28–33 illustrates, strategic narratives are advanced through the synergic efforts of state broadcasters, party officials' presence on social media and the work of Western influencers. As far as the *danmu* posted by the second wave of Rich's vlog viewers is concerned, temporality appears to have strengthened the explanatory power of the narrative being subjected to renewed scrutiny. Indeed, on learning that CCTV has rubber-stamped Rich's account of events, viewers flocked to Bilibili to unearth the truth behind the origins of the COVID-19 pandemic – as evident in the large number of *danmu* containing the term “考古” (conducting archaeological work), used by

viewers as part of expressions describing their decision to revisit the old vlog to access information that they had previously missed.

28	00:15.7	00:25.7	央视锤了!!	CCTV has given hard evidence!
29	00:29.7	00:42.7	这两天央视在提这个事,过了10个月	CCTV has been reporting this issue these days. 10 months later [i.e. after Rich's vlog was released].
30	00:38.9	00:51.9	央视不是慢,国家喉舌必须要有证据	CCTV doesn't [work] slowly. As a state-owned mouthpiece, it must have evidence.
31	00:44.5	00:57.5	2021 看完央视新闻,回来看视频	In 2021, [I] came back to watch this video after watching CCTV news.
32	02:59.1	03:12.1	央视官媒发声了,那代表很有可能已经有事实上的证据了	The representative of state-owned CCTV has announced that it's highly likely there is concrete evidence.
33	06:35.2	06:45.7	央妈正式回应了	CCTV has responded officially.

On the whole, the analysis of the body of *danmu* scrutinized here reveals that Chinese viewers overwhelmingly acquiesce with the elite-driven narratives that Rich articulates and animates in his vlog. Examples 34–43 are indicative of the extent to which the influencer's audience has unquestioningly absorbed the narrative that the COVID-19 pandemic originated in the US. As attested by the significant degree of repetition observed across individual *danmu*, Bilibili provides a productive site for the “repetition and accumulation of expressions and beliefs”, which in turn facilitates the “hardening of public opinion into consent” (Tyler 2013:78).¹⁵ Example 43 is particularly significant in this regard. On the whole, attempts to resist the strategic narrative articulated in this vlog are extremely rare (see examples 44–46).

34	00:01.5	00:12.0	实锤了!是真的	There is hard evidence now! It is true.
35	00:02.3	00:11.3	破案了	The case is solved.
36	00:02.4	00:15.4	翻回头来看,还是和初看的时候感觉一样——有理有据!	Watching it again, [I] still have the same feeling as my first [time] watching – [it's] reasonable with concrete evidence!
37	00:03.1	00:07.1	2021 真相只有一个!	In 2021, there is only one truth!
38	00:03.6	00:16.6	没想到 2020 年看到的 2021 被证实了	[I'm] surprised that a video [which I] watched in 2020 has been corroborated in 2021.
39	00:09.2	00:22.2	我又来了,刚发的时候看了觉得有点道理没想到真的	I'm here again. [I] thought it was reasonable when it was released but didn't expect it to be true.
40	00:18.5	00:31.5	2021 年 1月20 日前来打卡,新冠源于美国已是不争的事实!	On 20 January 2021, check-in. It's already an indisputable fact that the coronavirus is originated in the US!
41	00:23.6	00:36.6	现在实锤了,我去年刚好看到过这个视频!!!	There is hard evidence now. I've watched this very video last year!!!

42	00:23.9	00:27.9	2021 年美利坚投毒实锤	In 2021, there is hard evidence proving that America has poisoned us.
43	00:37.2	00:41.2	之前一直不敢公开支持这个视频,今天官方开口了,来了来了	I haven't dared to support this video publicly before. Today the government has said it. Here, I came.
44	00:09.8	00:22.8	了解事实,拒绝谣言。他都说直到证据确凿之前,自己不能相信这个阴谋论,请弹幕保持理智。	Know [the] facts and reject [the] rumours. He said that he will not believe this conspiracy theory without concrete evidence. So, please stay rational.
45	00:13.8	00:23.3	哪石锤了?	Where is the hard evidence?
46	00:36.5	00:49.5	阴谋论一样那个 大部分阴谋论拿不出来多少证据的 而且阴谋论会一口咬死自己说的就是对的	All conspiracy theories are the same. Most of them cannot provide much evidence, and they all say that they are right.

Concluding remarks

The analysis and discussion of *danmu* posted by Rich's viewers demonstrate the significance of affective flows within the virtual community galvanized by his vlog. Hundreds of comments are posted to praise and show respect for the 'big seer', using phrases like '手下我的膝盖' (accept my kneeling [before you]). The phrase '收下我的三联' – denoting the use of prolonged mouse clicks to simultaneously like a video, donate Bilibili currency, and subscribe to a Bilibili channel – is also used by a significant number of viewers to signal their decision to devote their undivided attention to their vlogger and his work going forward. Declaring their intention to donate the funds (回来补币) they have accrued in the past by providing their immaterial labour on the Bilibili platform is yet another expression of the lengths to which viewers may go to acknowledge a vlogger's influence and visibility in the attentional regime of Chinese social media. The participatory spectacle that *danmu* provide is constantly punctuated by manifestations of emotion prompted by the significance and implications of the 'big seer's' work, as in '全身发毛, 20%恐惧 80%气愤', which translates as 'goose bumps all over my body, 20% fear 80% anger'. It is also punctuated by expressions of mutual recognition and solidarity among audience members, who acknowledge the worth of fellow viewers' contributions through phrases like '被弹幕吓到 谢谢' (overwhelmed by the comments, thank you). Of particular interest in this context is the audience's treatment of *danmu* as a dedicated medium for the mutual expression of affect. For some viewers, the very action of posting a comment effectively represents an endorsement of the vlog content (e.g. '必须发条弹幕啊', must post a *danmu* comment [to show support]), as part of the infinite series of "rapid, reversible, incremental actions" that the Bilibili environment fosters (Chun 2011:64). Although a significant proportion of these expressions of affect may be planted by China's authorities (King et al. 2017), the analysis of this case study foregrounds the centrality of the production and exchange of compliant affective intensities in repressive authoritarian states seeking to assert control over their national digital space.

More broadly, the analysis of this case study suggests that subtitled vlogs posted by foreign influencers – in particular, those who have been exceptionally authorized to discuss

political content on Chinese social media platforms like Bilibili – serve as productive sites of narrative optimization in non-democratic regimes. Western vloggers working as part of wider initiatives involving other actors and agencies – including state broadcasters, printed media outlets and government officials with a social media presence – are able to garner a large following in the digital economy of attention and facilitate acquiescence with elite-driven discourses by enabling the affective construction of online sociality. Practically unchallenged by subscribers to alternative views, Western vloggers operating in platforms like Bilibili – which, unlike global social media, are demarcated by national boundaries – are able to capitalize on mundane affectivity as a way of promoting domestic adherence to official strategic narratives without deliberation. As is also the case with other COVID-19 disinformation campaigns, the vlog chosen as case study ultimately promotes and empowers manifestations of “self-serving cosmopolitanism”, understood as a “narcissistic and locally conditioned sense of global consciousness that is oriented towards the consolidation of self-identity and pride” (Zou 2021:524). This supports earlier claims that the parochialism of Chinese social media platforms fosters vehement manifestations of (often exclusionary) nationalism and impacts the way netizens construct and experience their imagined national community. Being able to penetrate the country’s social fabric pervasively, digital expressions of nationalism have become a key rhetorical device to forge consensus within globally networked environments (Schneider 2018). Behind the thickness of Bilibili’s ‘bullet curtains’, communities of shared affective receptivity are harnessed to produce compliant responses as part of China’s ongoing digital nation-building project.

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Notes

- 1 The use of the term disinformation by the outlets and thinktanks mentioned in the remainder of this section follows Bakir and McStay’s (2018) definition of the term as the deliberate creation and circulation of false information.
- 2 The collaboration between China Media Group and Russian news agencies – including RT, the Russian state broadcaster – has enabled the development of dedicated infrastructure for sharing material to be circulated on social media (CGTN 2018).
- 3 Michael’s understanding of ‘fellow traveller’ as “a person who is sympathetic to an ideology or organization and who cooperates with the organization’s politics without being a formal member thereof” (2019:78) draws on Bullock and Trombley’s (1999) definition.
- 4 An interesting illustration of the extent to which collective attention can be conditioned by social media is provided by Qi (2021), who reports on the reaction of Chinese netizens to the publication of *Wuhan Diary: Dispatches from the Original Epicenter*. The release of the English translation of the posts published online by Chinese author Wang Fang (writing under the pseudonym of Fang Fang) during the Wuhan lockdown between January and March 2020 was engulfed in controversy over the publisher’s choice of paratexts for the printed volume. As reported by Qi (2021:4), the blurb characterized China as an authoritarian state where technology is deployed to monitor citizens and their social media posts and presented the author as a dissident who decried the impact of corruption and “systemic political problems” on the country’s initial response to

the pandemic. As soon as the book became available on Amazon, “hundreds of thousands of Chinese netizens bombarded the Diary’s author with all sorts of criticisms, calling her ‘a traitor for supporting the enemy’s narrative’” (Yuan 2020; quoted in Qi 2021:6). Qi analyses the offensive mounted by netizens against what they perceived as threats to the Chinese Communist Party’s strategic narratives. The intensity of their affective response is largely accounted for by the fact that netizens’ social media timelines are overwhelmingly dominated by congenial expressions of support, to the detriment of dissonant or competing views.

5 See www.imdb.com/name/nm4012879/bio?ref_=nm_ov_bio_sm.

6 See https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Nathan_Rich.

7 See <https://hotpot.team/about/>.

8 It is common for Mandarin-speaking YouTube vloggers based outside China who provide commentary that does not follow the Chinese Communist Party line to attract users living in China (Zhu 2019). Access to a VPN allows Chinese netizens to circumvent the country’s Great Firewall in search of uncensored information. Given that Rich’s content is supportive of China’s official discourses, his large Chinese following on YouTube signals his followers’ desire to enhance his visibility and presence outside China’s borders.

9 <https://space.bilibili.com/394067394>.

10 For an overview of the historical and technological development of *danmu* or *danmaku*, see Dwyer (2017) and Pérez-González (2019).

11 See www.bilibili.com/video/BV177411Z77q.

12 The application, called 哔哩下载姬 (DownKyi), can be downloaded from <https://github.com/FlySelfLog/downkyi>. See www.programmersought.com/article/62706002892/.

13 The sets of digits accompanying each example denote the start- and end-times of the period during which each *danmu* is on display as it slides from the right to the left of the screen. The right-most column provides English glosses of each bullet comment.

14 See <https://playwerewolf.co/pages/character-roles>.

15 Although this is also the case with other social media platforms, the fact that *danmu* are superimposed on the image reinforces viewers’ perception of repetition and accumulation.

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