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Spicy Memes from Spicy Panda

Parker Hundley

Anthony Jones

Darren Linvill

Lian Norris

Helen Schmidt

See next page for additional authors

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Authors

Parker Hundley, Anthony Jones, Darren Linvill, Lian Norris, Helen Schmidt, and Jayson Warren



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Spicy Memes from Spicy Panda



*Parker Hundley, Anthony Jones,
Darren Linvill, Lian Norris, Helen
Schmidt, and Jayson Warren*

INTRODUCTION

On February 18, 2022, The New York Times and ProPublica reported on an ongoing English language propaganda and disinformation campaign originating in China. This report described a network of over 3000 inauthentic-looking Twitter accounts which worked to amplify a Twitter account called Spicy Panda (@SpicyPandaAcc). Spicy Panda itself had over 45 thousand followers and worked to attack the West and support pro-Chinese state perspectives. This network seemed to have links with iChongqing, a state linked multimedia platform based in Chongqing, a city in Sichuan, and famous in the West for its spicy food. Inauthentic accounts working to amplify the Spicy Panda account similarly worked to amplify accounts overtly run by iChongqing. The New York Times and ProPublica reports focused on Spicy Panda's messaging surrounding the Beijing Winter Olympics, ongoing at the time of their reports. The network, however, engaged in a much broader range of activity, both with regards to the genre of content shared and

the platforms involved, which this report will briefly detail.

NETWORK MESSAGING

The Spicy Panda network employed three consistent themes in its messaging: undermining of Western democracies, praising of Chinese culture, and applauding Chinese technological achievement.

UNDERMINING OF WESTERN DEMOCRACIES

Spicy Panda consistently leveled criticism at NATO, Western democracies, and elected officials, often explicitly focused on U.S. President Biden. Messaging attempted to portray the West as weak, ineffectual, and as puppets of the United States. Examples of this messaging are shown in Figure 2 and are exemplified by the January 30, 2022 tweet (and attached video): “#Trump said at a rally in Texas that Biden’s weakness and incompetence could lead to a third world war. He criticized that #Biden deliberately spoils relations with other countries.”



Figure 1, Spicy Panda profile image



Figure 2 (a), Spicy Panda Posts Undermining of Western Democracies

1 <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/02/18/technology/china-olympics-propaganda.html>
 2 <https://www.propublica.org/article/how-bots-and-fake-accounts-push-chinas-vision-of-winter-olympic-wonderland>
 3 <https://web.archive.org/web/20220217235136/https://twitter.com/spicypandaacc>



Figure 2 (b), Spicy Panda Posts Undermining of Western Democracies

In Spicy Panda’s final days (following the New York Times and ProPublica report) this anti-Western messaging included tweets which sought to point blame at the West as the cause of Russia’s invasion of Ukraine. Specifically, see Figure 3, Spicy Panda suggested NATO expansion was to blame for the invasion.

In Spicy Panda’s final days (following the New York Times and ProPublica report) this anti-Western messaging included tweets which sought to point blame at the West as the cause of Russia’s invasion of Ukraine. Specifically, see Figure 3, Spicy Panda suggested NATO expansion was to blame for the invasion.

Some anti-Western messaging crossed the line of simple Propaganda to outright falsehood. This included the February 11, 2022, tweet “#Washington attempts to offer a large sum of compensation to the athletes involved in its plan to create trouble & disturbance during #Beijing2022. It’s so shameful to viciously sabotage Olympics to satisfy some Western politicians’ political pursuits.” This claim of western compensation is disinformation spread by the Chinese about the United States’ plan to cause issues at the Olympics. On the contrary, evidence suggests US athletes were told not to speak out about or protest China’s negative human rights record.⁴

Many of the posts which worked to undermine Western democracies utilized Spicy Panda branded political cartoons. These cartoons were similar in style to the political cartoons shared by Chinese state media outlets such as The Global Times. Examples of these cartoons can be found in Figure 4.

PRAISING OF CHINESE CULTURE

Many posts within the Spicy Panda network served to portray Chinese life and culture in a positive light. Figure 4 offers examples of some of these tweets. Much of the content that the network spread, as reported by the New York Times, was centered around the Olympics, purporting that China was performing strongly and claiming that the accusations of cheating against China and its athletes were fabricated. This style of content is seen in a Spicy Panda tweet demonstrating the high-speed cameras being used to monitor the games for cheating, captioned “The ultra-speed 4K camera capable of recording every moment on the field is applied

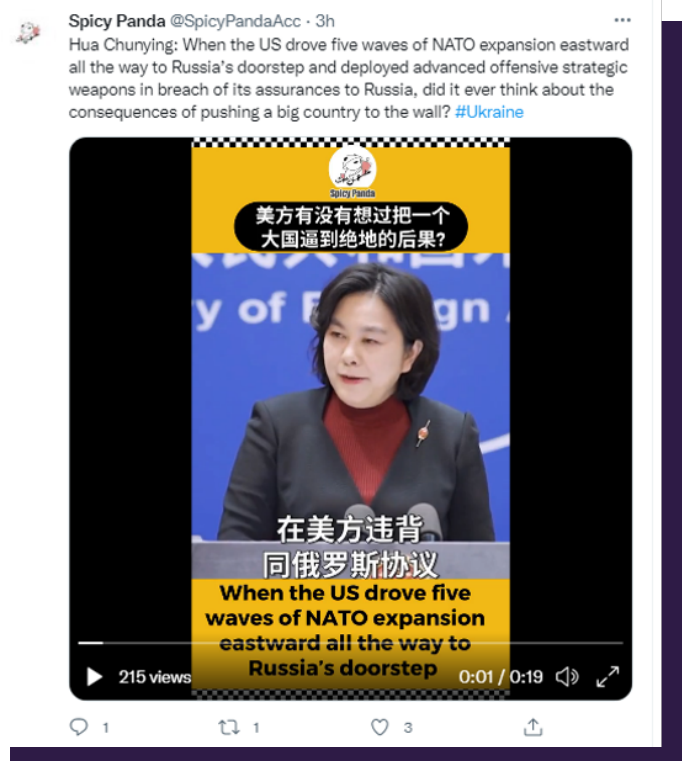


Figure 3, Spicy Panda Post blaming West for Russian Invasion of Ukraine.

⁴ <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/02/04/sports/olympics/pelosi-protests.html>

in #BeijingWinterOlympics. This camera makes fouls especially controversial “tactics” adopted by teams from some countries at the Speed Skating competition useless.” Spicy Panda tweeted this video after a recording was released of a Chinese athlete sabotaging their opponent in a skating competition.

While much of their recent content has been focused around the Olympics, it took other forms

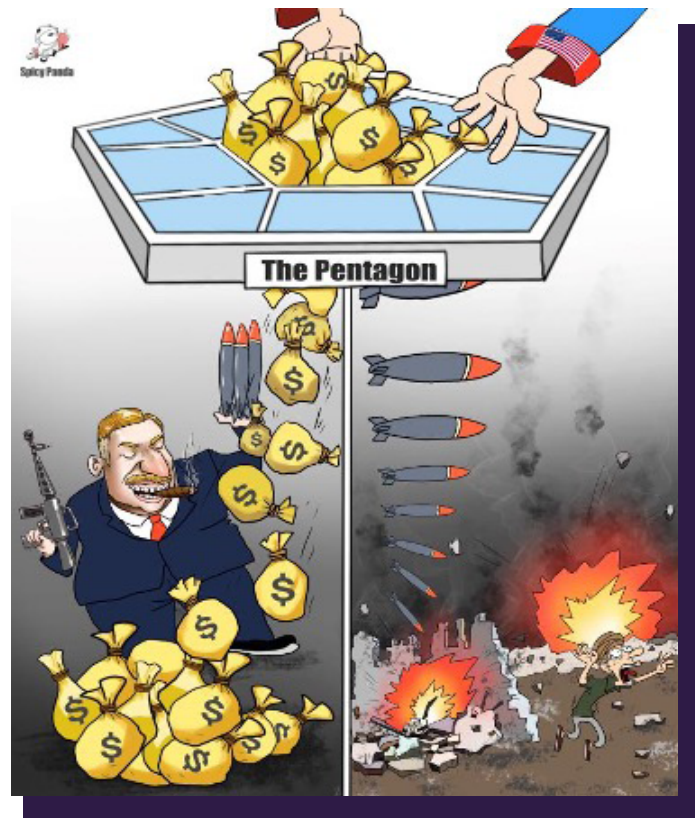


Figure 4, Spicy Panda Cartoons

as well. The account Spicy City (@wudao1116) tweets about the life and culture of the city of Chongqing and was frequently retweeted by accounts in the Spicy Panda network. One example (Figure 5) simply contains a photo of a man cooking in Chongqing, and while there is no direct message, the tweet provides an aesthetically pleasing and approachable window into life in China. Another example can be seen in the tweet

from Spicy Panda showing off festival decorations captioned, “We can feel the lantern festival everywhere as hundreds of colorful lanterns in various shapes are lighting up the night on streets. Wish you a fantastic year ahead!” Like the Spicy City photo, it displays living in Chongqing in a pleasing manner, perhaps creating a positive view of life in China for the viewer.

APPLAUDING CHINESE TECHNOLOGICAL ACHIEVEMENT

A final prominent theme seen in the Spicy Panda network’s messaging is the expression of esteem for Chinese technological and scientific

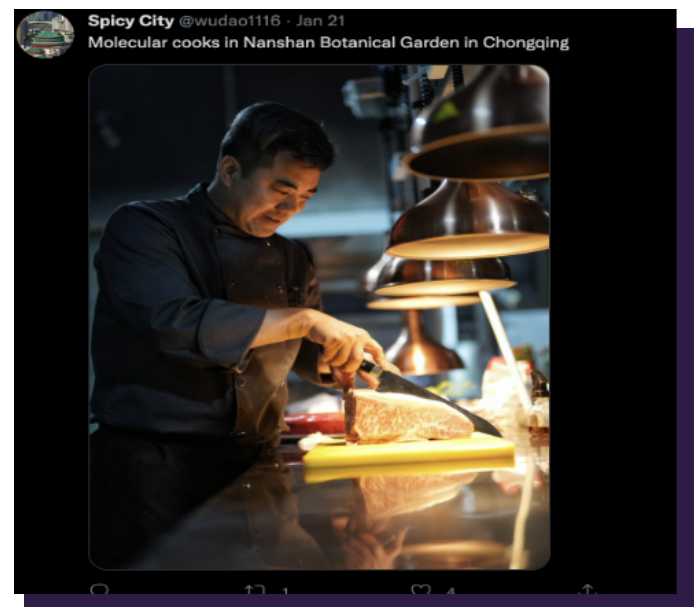
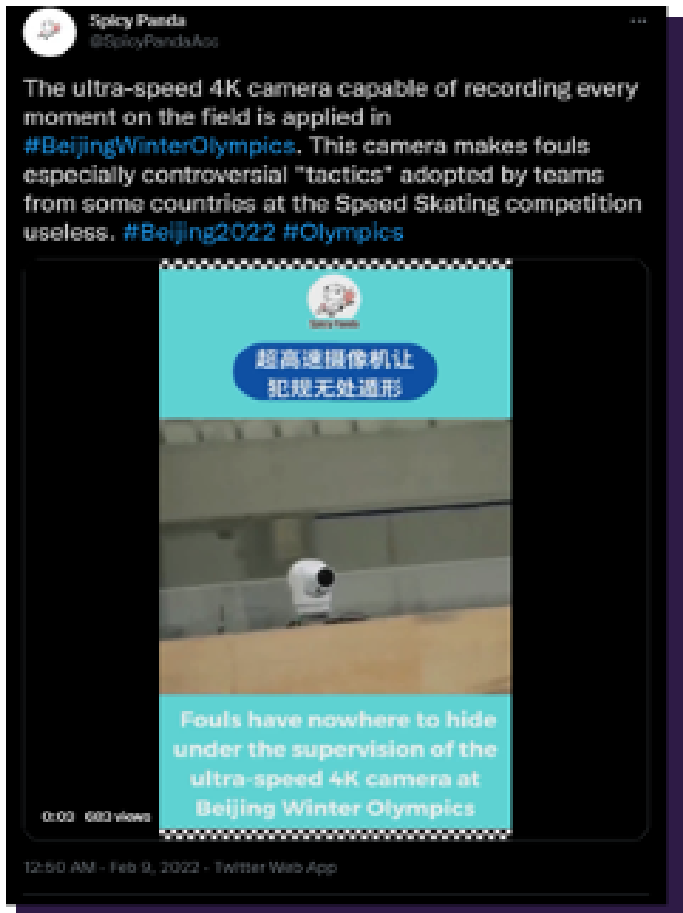


Figure 5, Spicy Panda Posts Praising of Chinese Culture

achievement. The network spread these messages by connecting to the broader Chinese state propaganda network and linking to websites such as Global Times, People’s Daily, and China Daily. Exemplar tweets are supplied in Figure 6. One such tweet includes, the January 16, 2022, tweet juxtaposing two railway pictures reportedly taken 26 years apart and commenting on how much China’s railway has advanced in the intervening years and portray China as a modern nation with advanced transportation.

Another example tweet highlights both Chinese culture and scientific achievement in a single



message, saying “Amazing! The mood and the melody of Jasmine Flower (Mo Li Hua) fill the space capsule. It’s the first time we’ve heard Chinese classic folk music from the universe. So proud! Thanks, Wang Yaping! #shenzhou13 #Wangyaping #spacelog #music.” Wang Yaping is also quoted saying, “Actually, I want to tell my daughter ‘mom will go to space and catch a star for you’.” These tweets flaunt China’s space program in a personal and potentially heartwarming manner.

NETWORK AMPLIFICATION

The New York Times and ProPublica report estimated as many as 3000 potentially inauthentic Twitter accounts working to amplify Spicy Panda. Our research supports this finding. As shown in the ProPublica report, these accounts largely worked to amplify Spicy Panda’s messaging through quote tweeting.

This is exemplified by a January 18, 2022, tweet from @SpicyPandaAcc, “UK primary school pupils sang “meet me in Beijing” in Mandarin to send best wishes to #BeijingwinterOlympics. Thank you for the warmest and cutest blessings! #Beijing2022.” This tweet was accompanied by a video of the event.⁵

This post was retweeted 35 times, but quote tweeted 243 times. Nearly all of these quote tweets contained one of two messages. 132 messages said “It’s really touching to hear the kids sing the song. Although we are in different skin colors, we share the same perseverance, together for a shared future!” while 91 messages said “What a beautiful song! We are looking forward to meeting you in Beijing to see the flames that warm the cold winter.” All 278 accounts that either retweeted or quote tweeted the original Spicy Panda message, however, have since been suspended.

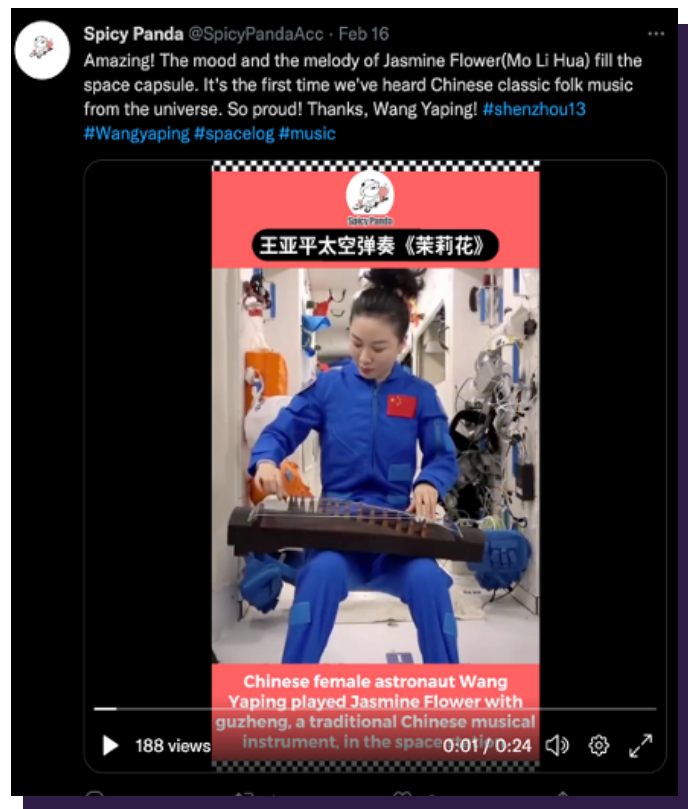


Figure 6, Spicy Panda Posts Applauding Chinese Technological Achievement

SPICY PANDA ACROSS PLATFORMS

Unreported by either The New York Times or ProPublica, the Spicy Panda network exists on both Facebook and Instagram in addition to Twitter. Our research was able to identify nine accounts on Facebook and fourteen accounts on Instagram which (A) shared Spicy Panda content, (B) gave no identifying information, (C) contained extremely high rates of identical content, and

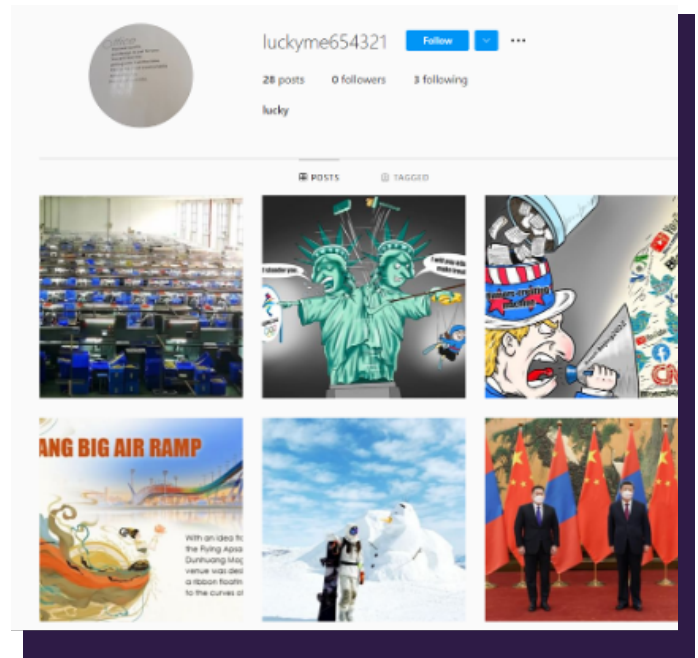
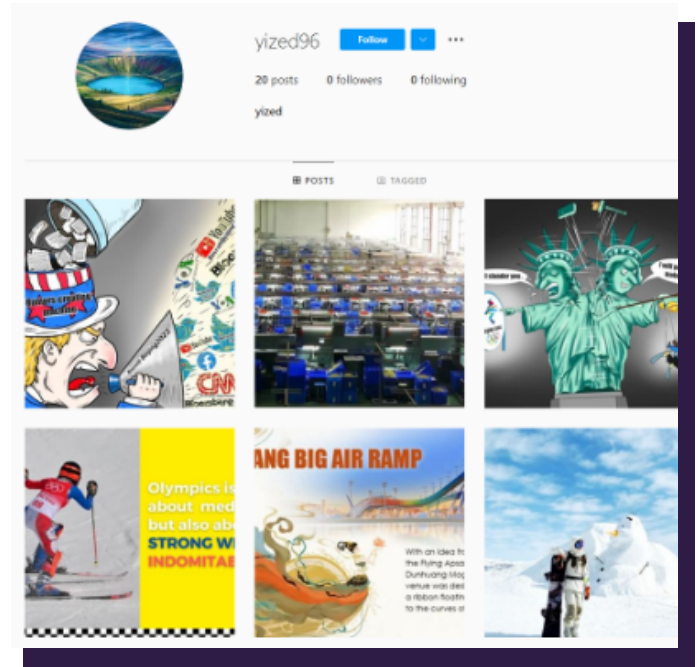
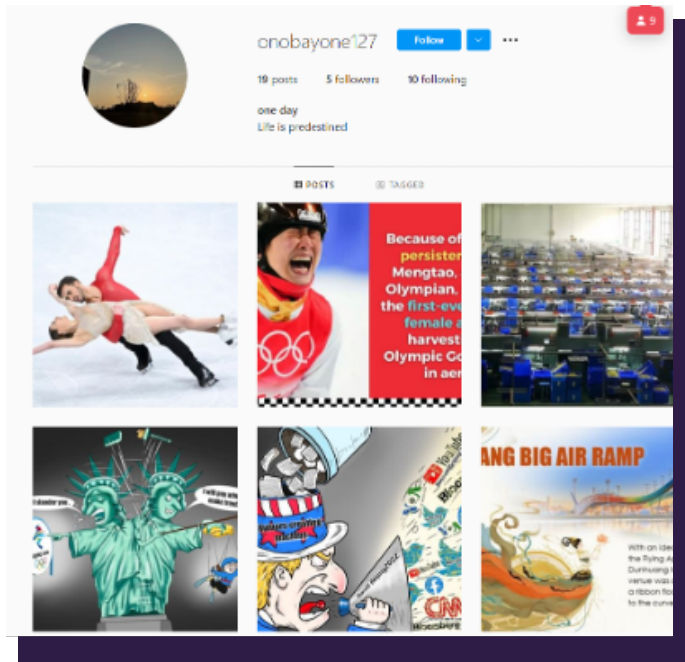
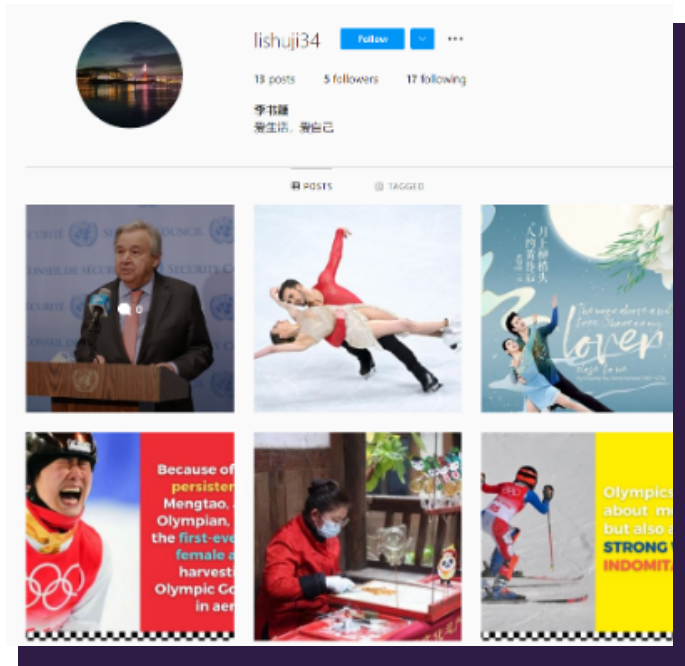


Figure 7, Spicy Panda Instagram Accounts

(D) ceased posting content by February, 2022. The high degree of similarity demonstrated by these accounts is demonstrated in Figure 6. All accounts are shared in the appendix.

These accounts gained few followers in their limited time posting. Most accounts had few or even zero followers. They do, however, serve to demonstrated the breadth of the Spicy Panda network and potential for future directions of growth had the campaign not been identified.

DISCUSSION

The analysis of the Spicy Panda network not only highlights the nuanced and multifaceted nature of state-sponsored disinformation, it also reveals areas where the nascent standards of practice can be improved by those seeking to disrupt coordinated online inauthenticity. First, Spicy Panda's extensive-yet-consistent messaging that appear to stem directly from the CCP's proverbial playbook (e.g., undermining Western democracies, praising Chinese culture, applauding Chinese technological achievements) provide substantive evidence for the ever-growing emphasis authoritarian regimes place on shaping large-scale global narratives in support of their policy agendas and the resource-intensive ways they go about maintaining plausible deniability (e.g., hiring firms to conduct influence operations).

Second, similar to Carl von Clausewitz's assertion that "war is a continuation of policy by other means," Spicy Panda demonstrates the paramount nature of recognizing that state-sponsored influence operations are always a smaller component of a larger politically guided scheme of maneuver. Just as campaigns fall under operations, operations under wars, and wars under a nation's grand strategy, state-sponsored online disinformation campaigns do not sow discord for the sake of discord but rather as an enabler of national grand strategy policy objectives at home and abroad.

Finally, these realities demand that those combatting online inauthenticity (e.g., scholars, journalists, social media platforms) collaborate to establish robust standards of practice that more effectively account for the nature of the threat. To be clear, the work published by the New York Times and ProPublica was not wrong – but it was unfortunately incomplete in its coverage which created unintended consequences.

For one, by only examining the messaging around the ongoing Winter Olympics (i.e., a newsworthy

event) and neglecting to incorporate the cross-platform integration on Instagram and Facebook, the coverage inadvertently portrayed Spicy Panda as smaller and less significant than it actually was. Similarly, fixating on one sub-component of the greater Spicy Panda apparatus led to shutting down only the Twitter portions of the network while simultaneously triggering no actions against their presence on Facebook or Instagram, or even an awareness by these platforms that this actor had a presence. These experiences demand introspection. Shutting down accounts is a noble endeavor. Doing so, however, can also lead to an infinite game of whack-a-mole as bad actors shift tactics.

Prioritizing a more holistic approach to understanding where these state-sponsored campaigns fit in the greater national policy agenda could facilitate greater collaboration across stakeholders and even establish means of identifying future campaigns faster. Yet taking such an approach may require doing something counterintuitive: Leaving certain nodes active and not publicizing that they have been identified as inauthentic in order to facilitate further analysis rather than simply terminating the account. Yet the seemingly counterintuitive nature notwithstanding, it is not without precedence in challenging matters of security and peace – in many ways, it evokes similar tactical quandaries and ethical dilemmas encountered by the mathematicians and cryptographers who cracked the German "Enigma" and Japanese JN25 codes during WWII. Taking action on all deciphered transmissions would have tipped the Allies' hand and revealed to the Nazis/Japanese that their codes had been compromised – which would have inevitably led to a cryptographic update that neutralized all the codebreaking efforts done up to that point. Yet by selectively taking action, the Allies were able to extend the viability of their codebreaking because the enemy didn't know the code was compromised. In that same vein, if leaving an inauthentic network active for an additional period of time leads to a more holistic understanding, more robust countermeasures,

and ultimately a large cross-platform deactivation, then it raises the question: Do incomplete approaches sometimes cause more harm than good?

APPENDIX. SPICY PANDA LINKED ACCOUNTS ON FACEBOOK AND INSTAGRAM

Name	Link
Facebook	
Bill Crow	https://www.facebook.com/profile.php?id=100057395768093
刘万万	https://www.facebook.com/profile.php?id=100077675616916
武化钙	https://www.facebook.com/profile.php?id=100066864314825
微行微言 (一言哥)	https://www.facebook.com/qing.pchong
那个谁	https://www.facebook.com/profile.php?id=100057152379706
应莹	https://www.facebook.com/profile.php?id=100076926195938
Huahua Huang	https://www.facebook.com/huahua.huang.336
胡子歌	https://www.facebook.com/profile.php?id=100077669403265
王碗碗	https://www.facebook.com/profile.php?id=100077833800761
Instagram	
Ningmengbusuan92	https://www.instagram.com/ningmengbusuan92/
John9637doe	https://www.instagram.com/john9637doe/
Ququer51	https://www.instagram.com/ququer51/
Liangzhimao7	https://www.instagram.com/liangzhimao7/
Waiter374	https://www.instagram.com/waiter374/
Onobayone127	https://www.instagram.com/Onobayone127/
Xiaerbaniya3	https://www.instagram.com/xiaerbaniya3/
Lishuji34	https://www.instagram.com/lishuji34/
Luckyme654321	https://www.instagram.com/luckyme654321/
Yized96	https://www.instagram.com/yized96/
pengdasun9	https://www.instagram.com/pengdasun9/
l.x.r.0703	https://www.instagram.com/l.x.r.0703/
nannanchen4	https://www.instagram.com/nannanchen4/
xiguapi90	https://www.instagram.com/xiguapi90/

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