Nationalizing Truth: Digital Practices and Influences of State-Affiliated Media in a Time of Global Pandemic and Geopolitical Decoupling

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This study explores Facebook-based state media accounts from various geopolitical players and focuses on three practices—*content volume*, *intermedia agenda-setting/following*, and *coordinated sharing* through networks of Facebook pages, groups, and verified public profiles. Findings suggest that Russian and Chinese state media are more active in content production than their global peers, yet with limited reach. Chinese state media stand out as both agenda-setters and followers: They inject distinct agendas into the global news flows while closely following agendas first covered by other global outlets. State media from all types of geopolitical players engage in inauthentic coordinated sharing, but with notable differences in the ideological composition of the mobilized Facebook networks: The Chinese coordinated-sharing network is homegrown and limited; the Russian network consists of right-leaning and counter-mainstream political groups worldwide, while the coordinated-sharing networks mobilized by the state media in the Middle East, Venezuela, and Western liberal democracies are left-leaning and human-rights focused.

Keywords: computational propaganda, state media, state-affiliated media, Facebook, social media

The year 2020 saw the unprecedented COVID-19 global pandemic and seismic shifts in geopolitics, notably the U.S.–China decoupling. Concerns are mounting that foreign adversaries exploit open digital platforms to sow divide and distrust (Posard et al., 2020). Major digital platforms have started labeling state-affiliated accounts operated by state media, diplomats, and foreign missions (@TwitterSupport, 2020). Communication researchers have begun mapping out problematic uses of algorithms and content for political

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gains (Howard, 2020), including studies of computational propaganda that reveal state-backed anonymous influence operations such as those launched by Russia's Internet Research Agency and Russian military intelligence (Linvill & Warren, 2020). Some turn to state media as they emerge to become major spreaders of the *infodemic* (Bennett & Livingston, 2018; Elswah & Howard, 2020; Molter & DiResta, 2020).

Nevertheless, state-affiliated media's role in the current information disorder is inadequately theorized. Extant works are limited to a few typical actors (e.g., Russia Today, Sputnik, CGTN), failing to consider them part of an interdependent global media ecosystem with rival players in a multipolar world. State-affiliated media are simplistically portrayed as *propagandists.* In reality, they wear multiple hats: as ambassadors in public diplomacy, as news outlets vying for journalistic credibility, and as attention-hungry social media accounts in the competitive attention economy (Nye, 2008; Thussu, 2018). Differences in the media policies and geopolitical ambitions of the respective countries may shape which role is prioritized. For geopolitical players with revisionist and combative diplomatic agendas, their state media may act through controversial coverage and algorithmic manipulation. In contrast, in less geopolitically contested regions, state media may simply play the benevolent role of providing alternative and regional perspectives to the Western-centric global media system. In short, what remains uninvestigated is the extent to which state-affiliated media's content and activities reflect their respective countries' political systems and geopolitical goals.

This study proposes three geopolitical groups: (1) *revisionist world powers* that have ambitions to challenge the current Anglo-Saxon dominance in world affairs and the Western liberal-democratic system; (2) *regional challengers*, which consists of authoritarian and semi-authoritarian regimes that battle for dominance in regional affairs; and (3) *liberal democracies* that do not control media outlets directly, but consider (albeit implicitly) their independently run international broadcasters as vessels of soft power. We believe that geopolitical considerations may underline how state-affiliated media cultivate their digital presence. Therefore, we focus on three dimensions of the digital presence: content development, agenda-setting/following, and inauthentic coordinated link-sharing behavior. The article is structured as follows: The first section reviews state-affiliated media's role in information disorder, which formulates a typology of outlets based on host countries' regime types and geopolitical profiles. The literature review informs the set of research questions and propositions, followed by the presentation of the data set, methods, findings, and interpretations.

State-Affiliated Media and Information Disorder

Communication scholars have studied information disorders on digital platforms (Bennett & Livingston, 2018). Their works address partisan news outlets (Faris et al., 2017), insurrectionist and identitarian movements (Eddington, 2018; Reijven, Cho, Ross, & Dori-Hacohen, 2020), and political astroturfing (Giglietto, Righetti, Rossi, & Marino, 2020), as well as state-sponsored influence operations (Freelon et al., 2020). These studies note the nefarious role of geopolitics in polluting online discourse (Howard, 2020). State-controlled media, in particular, have become active in computational propaganda, such as during the 2014 Ukrainian crisis, the 2016 U.S. Presidential Election (Howard, 2020), and, more recently, the COVID-19 pandemic (Molter & DiResta, 2020). However, the literature focuses on a few typical actors and instances of covert influence operations (e.g., Russia's IRA bots/trolls, China's 50 Cent Party). There lacks a holistic assessment of the broader state-affiliated media system's role in today's highly politicized online discourse, despite the public diplomacy literature highlighting many competing roles and

motives underlying state-affiliated media's operations and influence (Umejei, 2018; Wasserman & Madrid-Morales, 2018).

Three factors set state-affiliated media apart from other outlets. First, state-affiliated media tend to be *strategically deployed*: They are promoters of geopolitical interests, either through outright propaganda or through soft power (Nye, 2008). Digital platforms open up direct channels to appeal to foreign publics and new frontiers for narrative battles (Zaharna, 2016). Algorithms and the attention economy provide plenty of opportunity for strategic cultivation of audiences and influences (Golan, Manor, & Arceneaux, 2019). Second, state-affiliated media *wear multiple hats*. When not weaponized for geopolitical gains, they function as benevolent cultural ambassadors (Nye, 2008), or they serve as alternative media sources in the multipolar, historically Western-centric media world (Thussu, 2018). Third, they are *interdependent*. Although most are not politically independent, they nevertheless seek to build journalistic legitimacy, which could contradict their diplomatic mission (Umejei, 2018; Wright, Scott, & Bunce, 2020). As they hope to raise new voices, they are also subject to agendas of traditionally dominant Western media outlets (Golan & Himelboim, 2016). To fully gauge the role of state-affiliated media in information disorder, we must factor in the strategic, interdependent, and multifaceted roles of state-affiliated media.

Three Geopolitical Groups

Digital platforms take a somewhat reductive approach to labeling state-affiliated media. Twitter's labeling in 2020 is limited to media sources owned by permanent members of the U.N. Security Council (China, France, Russia, the United Kingdom, and the United States; @TwitterSupport, 2020). YouTube's labeling is based on direct governmental financing (ProPublica, 2019). We argue that existing state-affiliated media largely fall under three geopolitical groups in which actors either explicitly or implicitly deploy media outlets for public diplomacy. Across groups, media outlets vary by their ties to nation-states and the stake of geopolitical interest at play. Although the broad-brush typology likely overlooks nuances across regions, regime types, and media economics, it provides some baselines for gauging the role of geopolitics in state-affiliated media's operation.

Revisionist World Powers

This group includes state-sponsored and state-controlled media outlets in Russia and China. The outlets are financially supported and politically supervised by the two world powers seeking to challenge the current world order. Their international media policies are driven by grievances against Western hegemony—the idea that their countries are underrepresented and mischaracterized in the current media system dominated by Western players (Rawnsley, 2015; Yablokov, 2015). The September 2000 Doctrine of Information Security of Russia states that the mission of Russia's international broadcasting is to "stem the flow of negative and 'non-objective' information about Russia in the global information space" (Simons, 2014, p. 443). Likewise, China has long promoted the media *going-out* policy to promote its global image and to counter Western media (Thussu, 2018). Outlets controlled by revisionist world powers are the most ambitious and combative in carrying out their well-defined geopolitical roles. Reports suggest that Russian and Chinese outlets spend heavily on digital presence ("China Is Using," 2019). These outlets are also prone to foreign sanctions. Russian outlets operating in the United States were pressured in 2017 to register as

foreign agents under the U.S. Foreign Agent Registration Act (Stubbs & Gibson, 2017). In 2020, the U.S. State Department designated Chinese state-run media as foreign missions ("U.S. Designates," 2020). The UK experienced mounting calls for banning Chinese state media ("UK-Based Chinese News," 2020).

Regional Challengers

This group includes outlets operated by authoritarian and semi-authoritarian countries such as Iran, Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Turkey, and Venezuela. These outlets are embroiled in regional geopolitical juggling. Notably, in the Middle East, Qatar-financed Al-Jazeera, the Saudi-monarchy-funded Al-Arabiya, Iran's state-owned Press TV, and Turkey's TRT World are the arm of public diplomacy for their respective countries and regional rivalries (Golan et al., 2019). The outlets have been deployed in the ongoing Sunni-versus-Shia conflict and the 2017 Qatari–Saudi conflict (Behravesh, 2013; Samuel-Azran, 2013). Because of its international standing, Al-Jazeera is also seen as a Muslim-world counterforce to the Western hegemony in the media sphere (Seib, 2010). In South America, Venezuela's teleSUR English, cofounded by the governments in Cuba and Nicaragua, has long promoted a counter-Western, socialist, Pan-American, and national-patriotic agenda (Zweig, 2017). Within this group, media outlets' political independence varies greatly. While Press TV is directly controlled by the Iranian state, some other outlets in the group, including Al-Jazeera and TRT World, claim that they have editorial independence, which is challenged ("Justice Department Ordered," 2020).

Liberal Democracies

This group consists of media outlets from primarily liberal-democratic countries. Unlike other groups, the media outlets here are run independently, free from government interference. The funding structures include state ownership (e.g., France 24), public funding (e.g., Japan's NHK), and private ownership (e.g., Israel's i24News). Many outlets in this group are not typically considered state-affiliated because of their editorial independence and respective countries' long-standing free speech tradition. The state affiliation here is defined tenuously, referring to ties to the respective countries' public diplomatic missions. In Europe, relevant outlets include France 24, Deutsche Welle (DW), Euronews, and the BBC. The cultural diplomacy section of France's Ministry of Europe and Foreign Affairs website highlights France 24. France 24 aims to diversify perspectives on international issues by providing the "French perspective" (Połońska-Kimunguyi & Gillespie, 2017). Germany's DW is funded through government appropriations approved by the German Parliament, and the outlet enjoys editorial independence (Połońska-Kimunguyi & Gillespie, 2017). Euronews, jointly owned by several European public entities, provides Pan-European perspectives to support the EU's public diplomacy (Rasmussen, 2010). The BBC, with its long-standing reputation for impartiality, was mentioned in a 2015 British government document as a vehicle to promote British soft power, values, and interests (Government of the United Kingdom, 2015). In the Middle East, Israel's privately funded i24News has long participated in the country's development of soft power (Cherqui, 2013). In Asia, Korea's Arirang News and Japan's NHK are both publicly funded international broadcasters with the goal of enhancing their countries' international standing (Hall & Smith, 2013). In the United States, the Voice of America has been historically part of the U.S. diplomatic strategy, but with a legislative firewall preventing governmental influence overreach (Wright et al., 2020).

Digital Practices and Influence

Defined by respective geopolitical interests, state-affiliated media exist to diversify or challenge the current global news flow. Therefore, their operations are centered on the business of speaking up and being heard, namely, building up digital influences through various activities. Digital influence is multifaceted: It could be reflected by audience size or the capacity to drive online public attention. Increasingly, the ability to shape public discourse and sway public opinions hinges on the ability to mobilize crowd-based gatekeepers to share and promote certain content (Jackson & Foucault Welles, 2016). Online gatekeepers' connective actions of sharing, liking, and commenting build up an outlet's *virality* or *shareworthiness* (Song, Dai, & Wang, 2016; Trilling, Tolochko, & Burscher, 2017). Another aspect of digital influences lies in a news outlet's ability to introduce new agendas to the news flow. Media outlets are gatekeepers, defining the importance of specific events and topics (Welbers, van Atteveldt, Kleinnijenhuis, & Ruigrok, 2018). Agenda-setting is part of the power dynamics among information providers. For instance, the extensive agenda-setting literature reveals how major national media set the agenda for regional outlets (Guo & Vargo, 2020) and how the emergent digital-only partisan media outlets challenge the power traditionally held by the mainstream press (Guo & Vargo, 2017; Meraz, 2009).

State-affiliated media are expected to adopt various practices to maximize digital influence. Yet, their practices are confounded by competing roles. There is a thin line between "propaganda" and "soft power" (Wright et al., 2020). State-affiliated media, especially those in nondemocratic countries with a history of government interference, struggle to balance the dual roles of public diplomatic mission and news organization, as well as between hard news and soft propaganda (Wright et al., 2020). The media walk the fine line between diplomacy and journalism depending on their relationship with the state and the geopolitical interest at stake. Some may be overly involved in combative narrative control, whereas others enjoy editorial independence with a tenuous tie to a country's public diplomacy goal. It begs the question of how digital practices vary across the three groups of geopolitical players.

This study considers three practices: *content development*, *coordinated inauthentic sharing*, and *agenda-setting/following*. The three dimensions map onto notable digital platforms affordances that are conducive to influence-building. Namely, digital platforms provide low-cost and transnational content dissemination, enabling real-time reporting and networked sharing. Through such digital infrastructure, nation-states can acquire audiences, build like-minded communities, and reset global media agendas; they can do so through organic content production and/or strategic (or even manipulative) algorithmic maneuvering.

Content Development

State-affiliated media can simply produce and curate a massive amount of content to flood the digital space and increase the odds of visibility. The level of interest in content development could vary by the level of geopolitical ambition. Outlets tied to revisionist world powers are well funded and have a track record of ambitiously purchasing audiences ("China Is Using," 2019). Active audience acquisition could be accompanied by heightened interest in content development. Likewise, outlets tied to regional challengers, with their strategic positioning to promote diplomatic interests in regional affairs, are expected to be more active content producers than their liberal-democratic counterparts. This line of reasoning leads us to the

following two exploratory propositions, followed by a general research question probing the actual level of public attention achieved.

Proposition 1a: Outlets in revisionist world powers are expected to be more active in content development than peer organizations in other geopolitical groups.

Proposition 1b: Outlets in regional challengers are expected to be more active in content development than their counterparts in liberal democracies.

RQ1:   What is the relative level of virality of state-affiliated media across the three geopolitical groups?

Coordinated and Inauthentic Sharing

Inauthentic sharing, coordinated through a close-knit network (organic or acquired) of social media pages, groups, and verified public profiles to promote certain content in near-simultaneous fashion, is a recently exposed algorithmic malpractice (Giglietto et al., 2020). It has been used by political actors to lend certain voices/agendas instant visibility, as in the 2018 and 2019 Italian general elections and the European election (Giglietto et al., 2020) and astroturfing campaigns launched by right-wing nationalist groups in the United States ("Turning Point USA," 2020). Coordinated and inauthentic sharing is a tempting strategy for those who are the most ambitious in expanding digital influence. Prior studies show that outlets run by revisionist world powers (i.e., Russia and China) are especially prone to manipulating platform algorithms in information operations (Bolsover & Howard, 2019). While no existing study has probed this behavior by state-affiliated media outlets, we follow the argument made earlier and expect that outlets with the highest geopolitical interest/stake will be the most motivated to use coordinated and inauthentic sharing. Hence, the following is proposed:

Proposition 2a: Outlets in revisionist world powers are expected to be the most active in using coordinated and inauthentic sharing, as compared with peer organizations in other geopolitical groups.

Proposition 2b: Outlets in regional challengers are expected to be more active in using coordinated and inauthentic sharing than their counterparts in liberal democracies.

Agenda-Setting/Following

State-affiliated media are designed to shake up the status quo by becoming alternative or counter-mainstream voices. However, earlier studies show no substantial difference in content between state-affiliated media that proclaim alternative perspectives, and traditional Western media: Al-Jazeera English, for example, mostly followed the news on mainstream Western outlets (Bebawi, 2016). Chinese state media coverage of Africa also appeared to have provided no alternatives to Western media's coverage (Marsh, 2016). Nevertheless, recent coverage of the COVID-19 pandemic by Chinese and Russian outlets showed sharply distinct and divisive narratives (Jaworsky & Qiaoan, 2020; Molter & DiResta, 2020). Coverage differences could be induced by the need to walk the fine line between hard news and soft propaganda. State-affiliated outlets can stand out by introducing unique agendas to diversify and rectify the existing

news flow. Outlets may promote country-specific narratives. Prior works show China's approach known as "to know us is to love us" (Rawnsley, 2015, p. 274); this approach involves Chinese outlets telling China's story and emphasizing the cultural China framework to increase public cultural affinity to the country (Rawnsley, 2015). Conversely, outlets can *blend in* by following or tagging along popular news agendas also covered by peer organizations. In fact, the global media system is highly interdependent, with outlets influencing and following one another's agenda (Golan & Himelboim, 2016). Blending in and appearing more like their journalistic peers might be a safer approach because it may offer a facade of legitimate journalism, especially when outlets seek to shake off the propagandist image (Wright et al., 2020). In this realm, Russian outlets are known for shunning Russian domestic coverage and closely following political events in Western democracies (Elswah & Howard, 2020; Rawnsley, 2015). However, the Russian approach is rather combative, best described as divide and conquer, and involves controversial coverage of foreign countries to discredit liberal democracies (Elswah & Howard, 2020; Rawnsley, 2015). The following questions are proposed to examine outlets' agenda-setting/following practices.

RQ2a: *To what extent do state-affiliated media in different geopolitical groups set the news agenda for peer outlets?*

RQ2b: *To what extent do state-affiliated media in different geopolitical groups follow the news agenda of peer outlets?*

Methods

Data Source

This study is based on state-affiliated media accounts on Facebook, which at the time was the world's largest online social networking platform and the top social site for news in the United States (Pew Research Center, 2019a). Facebook is used by a larger share of U.S. adults (69%) than Twitter, another widely studied platform (Pew Research Center, 2019b). The Facebook data were provided by CrowdTangle, a content discovery and social analytics tool owned by Facebook. We selected 32 outlets to cover the three geopolitical groups (see Table 1).

Table 1. Selected Outlets.

Page Name	Category	Country
CGTN Africa	Revisionist world powers	China
CGTN America	Revisionist world powers	China
CGTN Europe	Revisionist world powers	China
China Daily	Revisionist world powers	China
CGTN	Revisionist world powers	China
China Plus America	Revisionist world powers	China
China Plus News	Revisionist world powers	China
China News	Revisionist world powers	China
Global Times	Revisionist world powers	China
People's Daily	Revisionist world powers	China
T-House	Revisionist world powers	China
Xinhua News North America	Revisionist world powers	China
China Xinhua News	Revisionist world powers	China
RT America	Revisionist world powers	Russia
RT	Revisionist world powers	Russia
RT UK	Revisionist world powers	Russia
TASS	Revisionist world powers	Russia
Al-Arabiya English	Regional challengers	Saudi Arabia
Al-Jazeera English	Regional challengers	Qatar
Press TV	Regional challengers	Iran
Press TV UK	Regional challengers	Iran
teleSUR English	Regional challengers	Venezuela
TRT World	Regional challengers	Turkey
Arirang News	Liberal democracies	South Korea
BBC World Service	Liberal democracies	UK
CNN International	Liberal democracies	USA
DW News	Liberal democracies	Germany
Euronews English	Liberal democracies	EU
FRANCE 24 English	Liberal democracies	France
i24NEWS English	Liberal democracies	Israel
NHK WORLD-JAPAN	Liberal democracies	Japan
Voice of America-VOA	Liberal democracies	USA

Several considerations shaped the sample choice presented earlier. First, to select outlets for the revisionist world powers category, we included most of the well-known English-language state media in Russia and China, except for Sputnik News. We excluded Sputnik News because it is not as recognizable as other Russia-based international news hubs, such as RT and TASS (despite Sputnik's known role in spreading partisan lies in its domestic coverage of U.S. politics and Brexit). There is also no reason to expect Sputnik to deviate too much from its peer outlets. Noteworthy is that almost all outlets in this category are designated as state-affiliated by major digital platforms (e.g., YouTube, Twitter) because of their high-stake

geopolitical profiles and clear links to the respective governments of the two world powers (@TwitterSupport, 2020). The outlets in this category are also the most focused on in previous studies of information disorder (Bruns, Harrington, & Hurcombe, 2020; Molter & DiResta, 2020). For the regional challengers category, our selection features those embroiled in high-stakes geopolitical conflicts (e.g., the Palestinian–Israeli conflict, the Sunni–Shia divide). Such selection may overlook countries in Africa, Southeast Asia, and South Asia, where there is still significant geopolitical rivalry. Nevertheless, the omission can be justified on two grounds. For one, the outlets in the less covered regions appear to be less well-known. For instance, All India Radio and Radio Pakistan represent two outlets of geopolitical rivalry, yet, they are far less internationally known than Al-Jazeera, TRT World, and Al-Arabiya. With predominantly domestic coverage, such outlets do not seem to position themselves as global/regional news hubs. For this reason, we expect that the smaller and more domestically oriented outlets may operate under a different logic compared with those that aspire to become a global/regional news hub. Likewise, for the liberal democracies category, our selection is not meant to be exhaustive, but to include, at the very least, the major actors. In short, we acknowledge that our sample is not comprehensive, and it may skew toward prominent actors. With wide variations in regime types, level of economic development, and media policies within a geopolitical group, the selected outlets may not possess all attributes that define the uniqueness of geopolitical players. To reduce potential sample bias, we provide country-level analysis to complement the more macro-level analysis at the level of geopolitical groups.

The study period spanned January 1, 2020, to August 15, 2020. This time frame covered major developments of geopolitical importance, including the COVID-19 pandemic, in which the origin of the virus, each country's disease control efforts, and the race to develop the first vaccine became points of geopolitical contention and national pride. Notably, Chinese officials' allegation that the virus was brought by Americans and Trump's use of the "China Virus" label likely fueled the deterioration of the U.S.–China ties (Zheng, 2020). The deteriorated relations resulted in the expulsion of Chinese journalists, the closure of the U.S. consulate, and increased scrutiny of Chinese tech firms. Meanwhile, the Chinese government lauded the success of the Chinese model, the country's effective disease control, and efforts to reopen the economy (Zhai & Vasovic, 2020). To prepare the data set, all posts by the selected 32 outlets' Facebook pages within the time frame were downloaded, which consisted of 221,592 posts and associated Facebook engagement indicators (e.g., counts of likes, shares, and comments).

### Measures and Analytical Plan

For Propositions 1a and 1b, we calculated daily post volume. For RQ1, we calculated the daily average count of Facebook likes and shares as a proxy measure of content virality. For Propositions 2a and 2b, we used the algorithm developed by Giglietto and colleagues (2020) in the open-source R package CooRnet. The algorithm detects coordinated and near-simultaneous link-sharing behavior by a network of Facebook pages, groups, and verified public profiles (hereafter, Facebook entities). Finally, for RQ2a and RQ2b, we used the R library RNewsflow, which was developed to model content homogeneity and news diffusion (Welbers & van Atteveldt, 2019). For the RNewsflow analysis, we combined the original text of Facebook posts and descriptions of links, photos, and videos shared in the posts. Additionally, we used part-of-speech tagging to filter nonessential words, and we retained only nouns, proper names, and hashtags because these linguistic entities were arguably the most indicative of the news agenda reflected in Facebook posts. The RNewsflow algorithm,

using the 24-hour sliding window, scans through the text to calculate similarity (the default similarity threshold = .4) in news content produced within the 24-hour window and constructs a network based on content similarity across outlets and the three geopolitical groups. This means that two articles must have a minimum of 40% overlap in nouns, proper names, and hashtags to be considered similar. It is important to note that any flow of news agendas may reflect through various linguistic aspects, which cannot be fully captured through a basic computational analysis. While a manual content analysis may reveal nuanced agenda flows, our analysis is fitting given the size of the data set. Our analysis provides a basic, but efficient, analysis of potential flows of agendas. For validation (to test whether articles rated as similar by the RNewsflow algorithm are truly similar in topics/agendas), we manually coded 50 article pairs rated the lowest on the similarity measures (just passing the .4 threshold). A total of 38/50 (76%) articles were manually rated as covering the same or similar topics. By this count, we expect that article pairs rated higher on the similarity measure would have a higher chance of covering the same or similar topics.

Results

Content Development and Virality (Propositions 1a and 1b, and RQ1)

Figure 1 presents the descriptive findings concerning content volume. Based on the daily average number of posts sent per outlet in each geopolitical group, revisionist world powers' news outlets were among the most productive, followed by outlets in regional challengers and liberal democracies. The outlet-level analysis shows that the most active outlets were China's Xinhua News and CGTN, Saudi Arabia's Al-Arabiya, and Russia's RT.
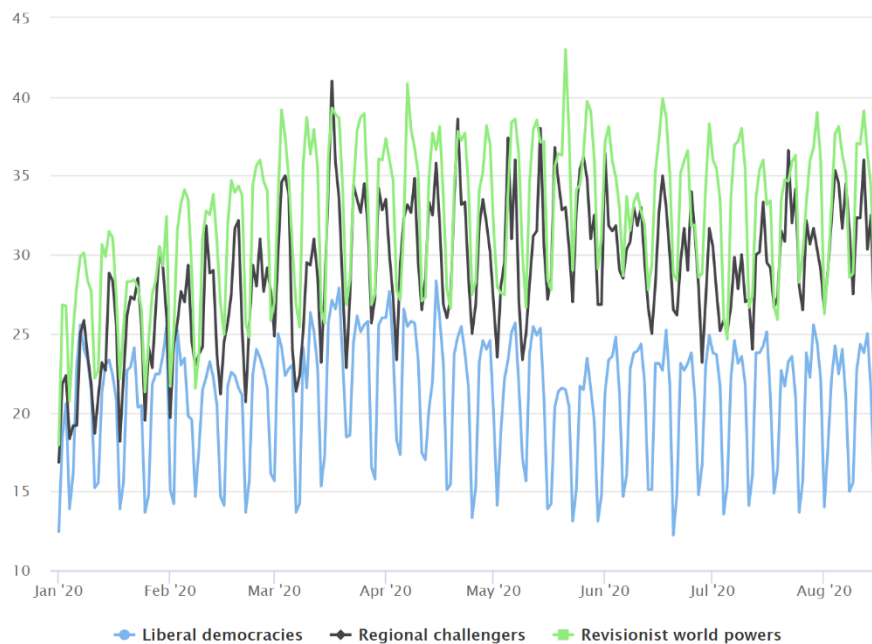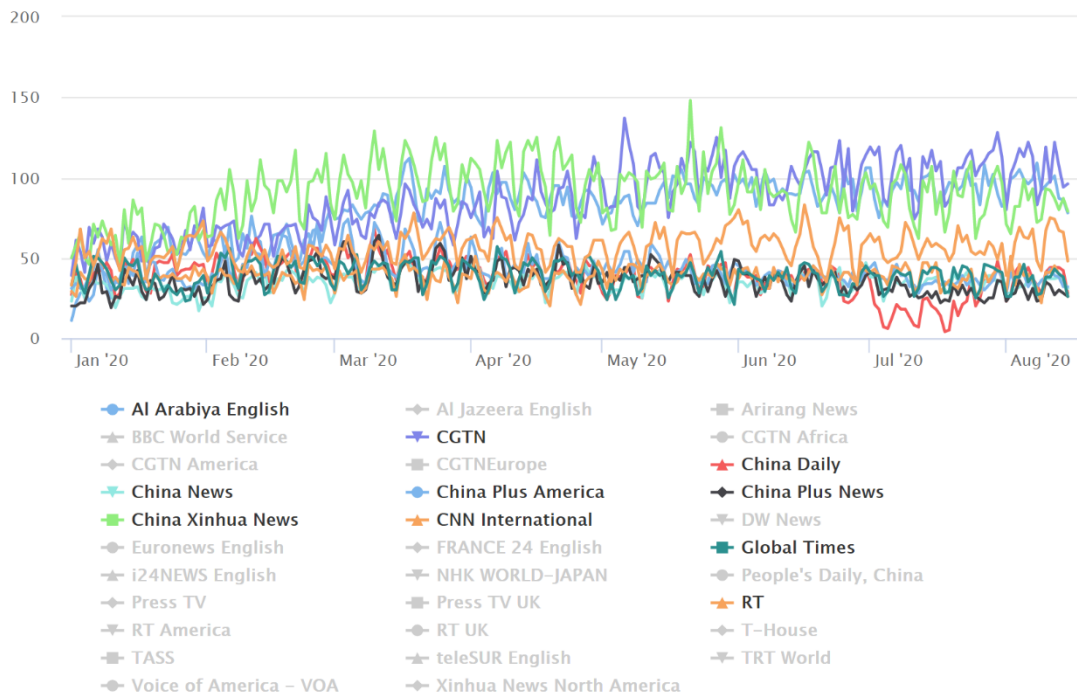
Figure 1. Daily post volume by three geopolitical groups and the top 10 active outlets.

For RQ1 concerning content virality, Figure 2 tracks the form of virality by Facebook likes.
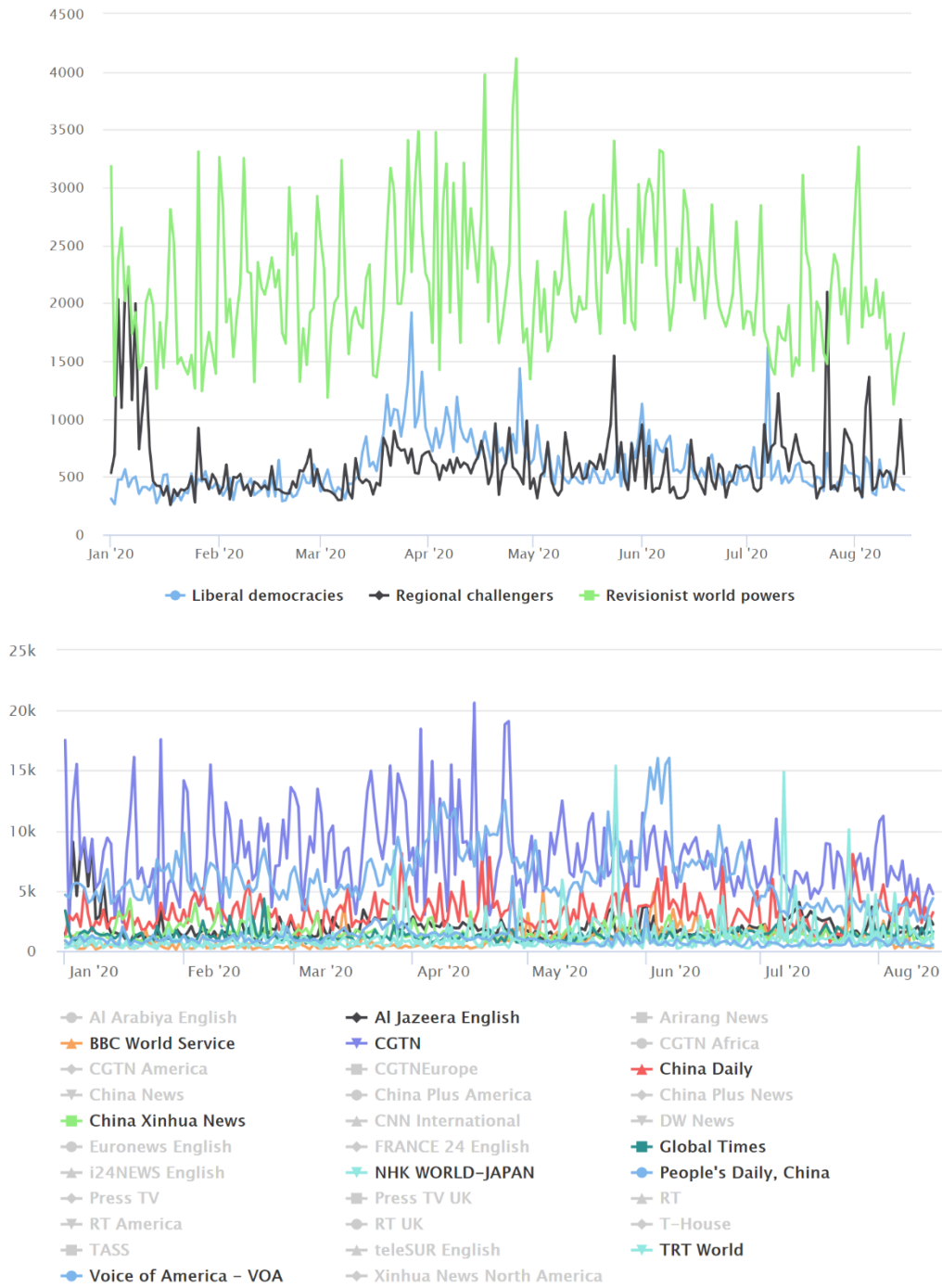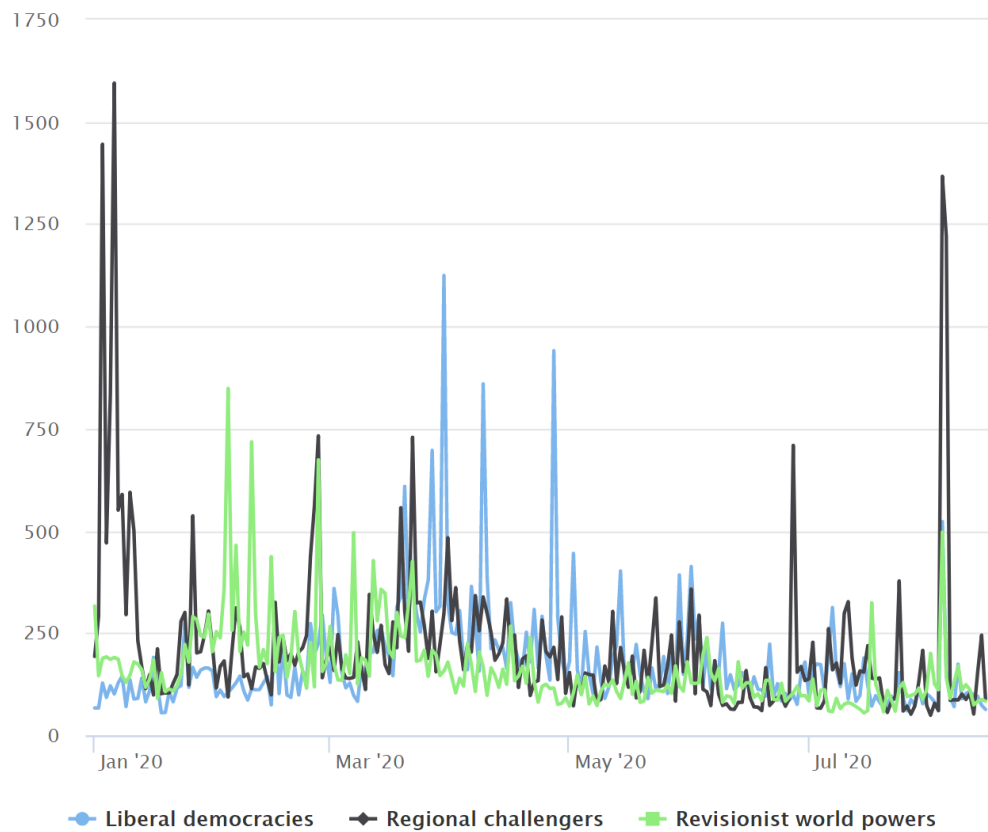
Figure 2. Daily likes by three geopolitical groups and the top 10 most liked outlets.

In terms of virality by Facebook likes, outlets from revisionist world powers have a sizable lead over their peers in other groups. China's CGTN, *People's Daily*, and *China Daily* were among the most liked by this metric. However, when considering virality in terms of Facebook shares, the pattern (see Figure 3) appeared less consistent.
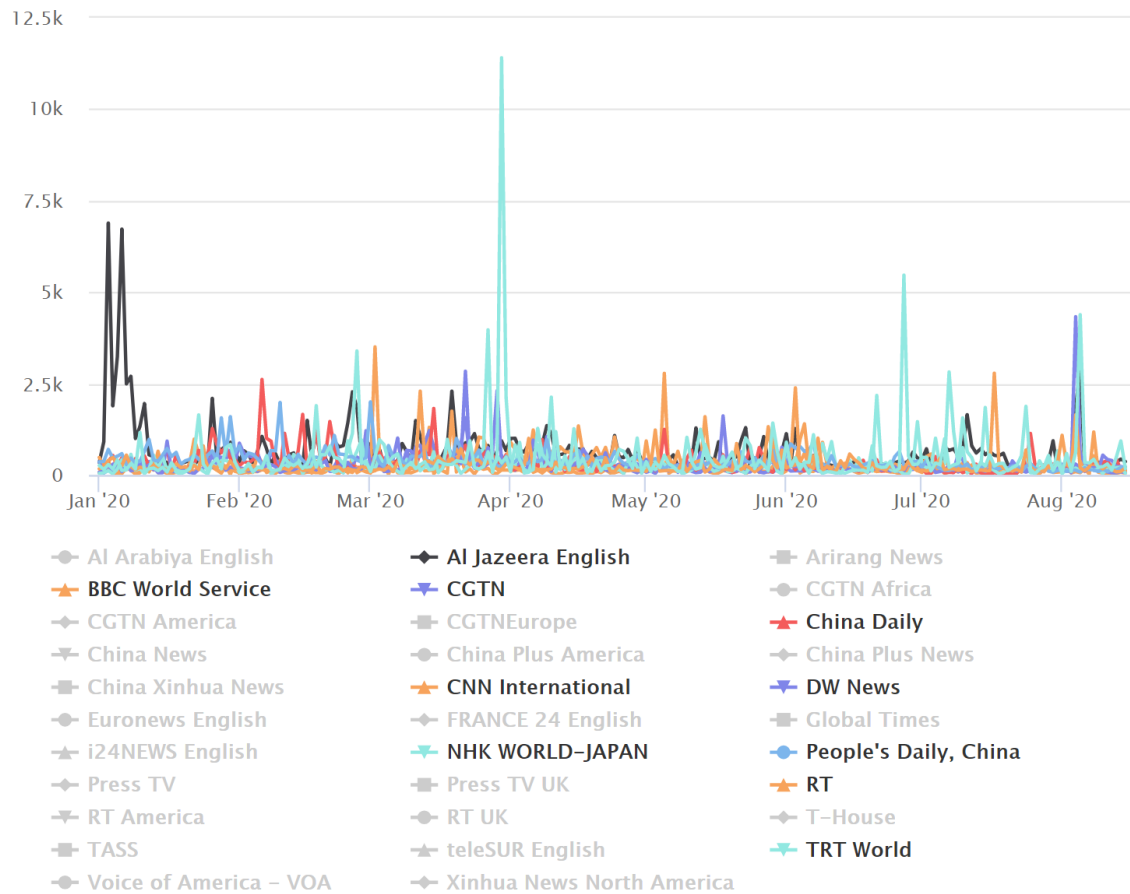
Figure 3. Daily shares by three geopolitical groups and the top 10 most shared outlets.

There were bursts of virality throughout the study period. Outlets from revisionist world powers, despite having the upper hand in gaining favorability (i.e., Facebook likes), did not have a clear advantage in propagating their content through word-of-mouth sharing. In a post hoc analysis of the top 20 most liked and shared posts from Chinese and Russian outlets, respectively, four of the 20 most liked posts were related to COVID-19; the rest were on the topics of tourism, cultural affairs, sports, and technology. Among the 20 most shared, eight were related to COVID-19 or encouraging, positive human-interest coverage of telling China's story, and the remaining are about cultural affairs, technology, the Beirut blast, and racial tension in the United States. We also conducted a post hoc analysis of each virality burst. The burst in January was driven by Al-Jazeera's coverage of two separate topics: the assassination of Iranian major general Qasem Soleimani, and Nigeria's oil industry. The burst in April was driven by NHK's coverage of unseen coronavirus risks. The burst in June resulted from TRT World's coverage of global coronavirus cases crossing the 10-million threshold. TRT World, along with DW News, contributed to the burst in early August through the coverage of the Beirut blast. While Russian and Chinese outlets had several small bursts of virality, theirs appear insignificant in comparison with those driven by Al-Jazeera and NHK.

Coordinated Link-Sharing (Propositions 2a and 2b)

We began by compiling link posts (posts that contain URLs linked to media outlets' original content). Outlets from revisionist world powers produced the most link posts (n = 38,538), followed by outlets in liberal democracies (n = 26,130) and in the regional challengers category (n = 23,619). Table 2 shows the top 10 outlets with the most link posts. The CooRnet algorithm scans through the links to identify close-knit networks of Facebook entities (public pages, groups, and profiles) involved in "near-simultaneous" coordinated sharing of the same news content (Giglietto et al., 2020). We considered four metrics to probe the scope of coordinated link-sharing: *entity count* (the number of Facebook entities involved in coordinated sharing for an outlet), *component count* (the number of close-knit networks of Facebook entities involved in coordinated sharing for an outlet), *average coordinate share count* (the average number of coordinated shares performed by each involved Facebook entity for an outlet), and *average subscriber count* (the average number of followers of each involved Facebook entity for an outlet).

Table 2. Top 10 Outlets by Link Post Count.

Outlets	Link Count
Al-Arabiya English	11,906
CNN International	7,952
RT	7,139
CGTN	6,992
China Plus America	5,551
Al-Jazeera English	5,485
CGTN Africa	4,877
China Xinhua News	4,809
Euronews English	4,254
China Plus News	3,889

First, we examined entity count and component count, which gauge how wide the coordinated sharing networks were (see Figure 4). Outlets from liberal democracies appeared to have mobilized the largest number of Facebook entities for near-simultaneous sharing, followed by outlets in revisionist world powers. Concerning the number of close-knit components (i.e., component count), revisionist world powers' outlets mobilized the highest number of components/networks of Facebook entities. At the outlet level, CNN International, RT, teleSUR English, France 24, Press TV UK, Euronews, VOA, RT UK, and Al-Jazeera were among the top outlets by the number of Facebook entities mobilized. The top 10 outlets mobilizing the most close-knit components/networks were RT, CNN International, RT UK, France 24, VOA, DW News, NHK, teleSUR English, i24News, and Press TV. To control for the variations in link post count across outlets, we also calculated *entity count in the proportion of the total number of link posts* for each outlet. By this measure, several outlets from revisionist powers topped the list (Table 3), including China's T-House, Global Times, and People's Daily; Iran's Press TV; Russia's RT; and Venezuela's teleSUR English. Many of such outlets also had the largest count of close-knit components in the proportion of total link count.
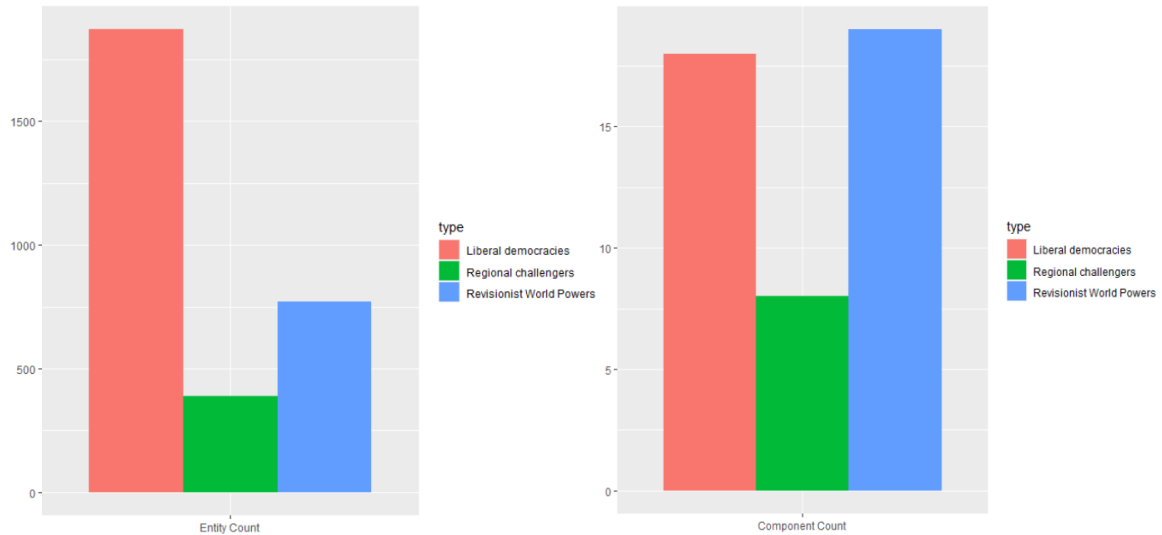
Figure 4. Counts of coordinated sharing entities and components by geopolitical groups.

Table 3. Top Outlets by Entity Count Ratio and Component Count Ratio.

By Entity Count Ratio				By Component Count Ratio			
Outlets	Entity Count	Link Count	In Proportion of Total Link Count	Outlets	Component Count	Link Count	In Proportion of Total Link Count
T-House	9	22	0.41	T-House	3	22	0.14
Press TV UK	119	360	0.33	People's Daily	1	13	0.08
RT America	6	25	0.24	Global Times	2	47	0.048
Global Times	10	47	0.21	RT America	1	25	0.04
CNN International	1385	7,952	0.17	RT UK	13	1,648	0.01
People's Daily	2	13	0.15	DW News	11	1,680	0.01
RT	645	7,139	0.09	FRANCE 24	13	2,303	0.01
FRANCE 24	142	2,303	0.06	Press TV	6	1,074	0.01
RT UK	91	1,648	0.06	NHK WORLD-JAPAN	10	2,156	0.005
teleSUR English	166	3,023	0.06	VOA	12	2,939	0.004

Note. Arirang News was removed because it produced fewer than 10 link posts.

Next, we used the metric average coordinate share count, which indicates the potential reach of the coordinated sharing behavior. Regional challengers' mobilized entities had performed the most coordinated sharing (Figure 5). At the outlet level, Chinese outlets topped the list by this metric (see Table 4). Based on the average account subscriber count, Facebook entities mobilized by revisionist powers' outlets had comparatively higher subscriber counts (Figure 6). Again, Chinese outlets topped the list (see Table 5).
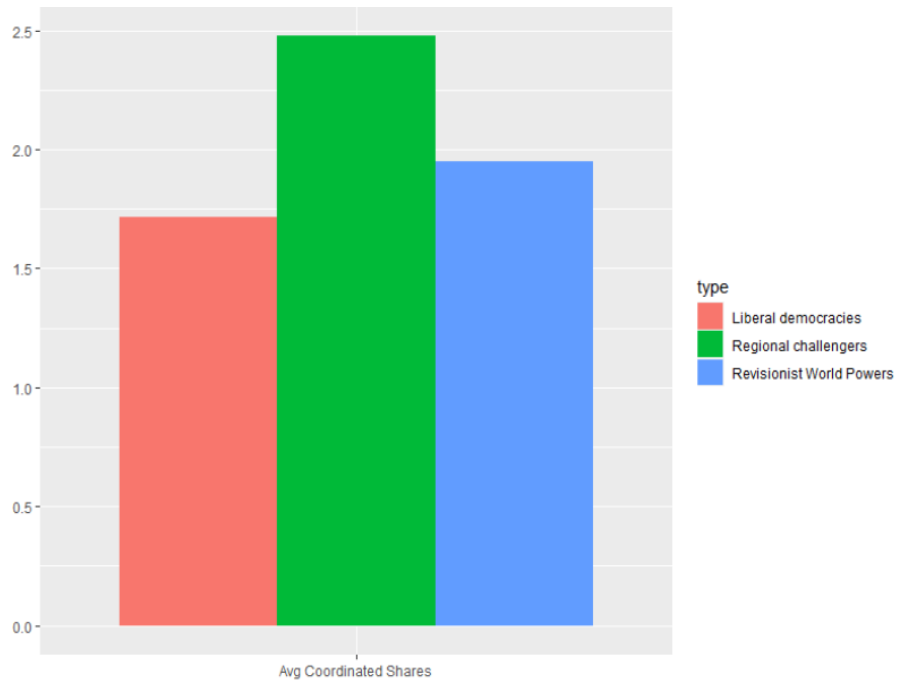
Figure 5. Average coordinated shares by geopolitical groups.

Table 4. Top Outlets by Average Coordinated Shares.

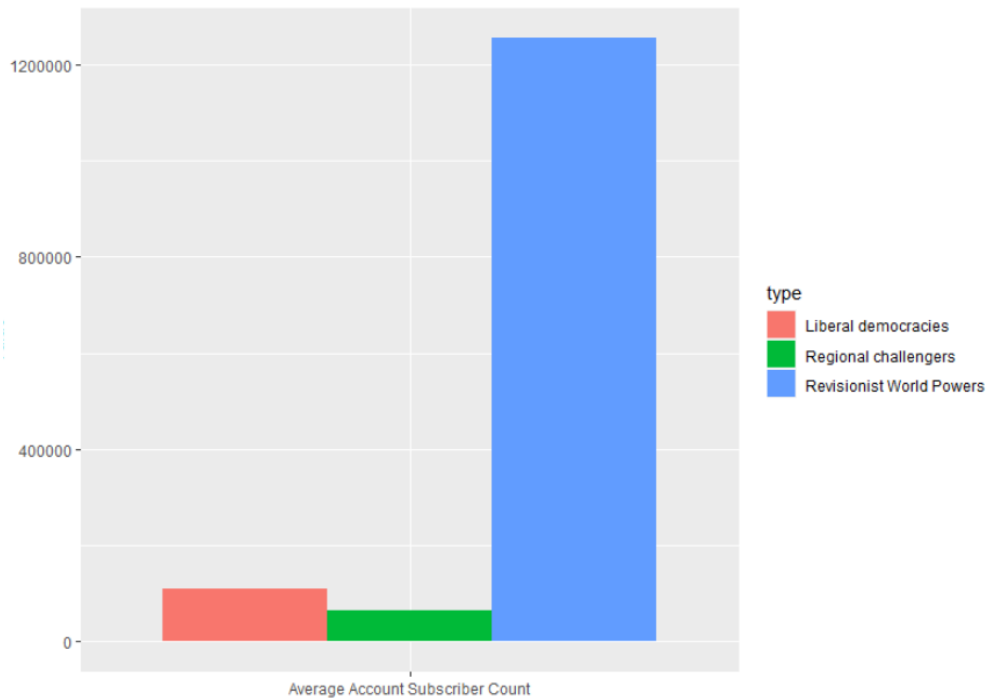| Outlet	Average Count
Xinhua News North America	22
Xinhua	18
CGTN America	12
China Plus News	11
China Plus America	8
Al-Jazeera English	7
CGTN	6
China Daily	6
TASS	6
Global Times	4

Figure 6. Average account subscriber count by geopolitical groups.

Table 5. Top Outlets by Average Account Subscriber Count.

Outlets	Average Account Subscriber Count
CGTN America	55,250,340
China Daily	51,802,240
Xinhua	42,485,480
Xinhua News North America	42,485,480
T-House	15,641,180
CGTN	13,786,009
China Plus News	12,920,923
China Plus America	11,755,172
CGTN Europe	10,036,233
Global Times	5,929,525

We also conducted a post hoc analysis of the profiles of prominent Facebook entities tagged as suspiciously involved in coordinated and inauthentic sharing. The Chinese outlets' coordinated link-sharing network was comparatively small, only involving 24 Facebook entities. Based on the 20 most central Facebook entities (ranked by degree centrality), the network appeared to be largely homegrown, meaning that the most central entities were official Facebook pages operated by different Chinese state media (nine of the top 20 entities). China's conglomerate of multimedia outlets appeared to be readily tapped for self- and cross-promotion of homogeneous content. The rest of the top entities in the Chinese network included

Facebook pages/groups in Malaysia, Indonesia, and Ethiopia. Notably, several top entities were tied to supporters of the sitting Indonesian president Joko Widodo, his PDI-P party, and an anti-West public group that appears to have a Russian origin. The Russian network was much more extensive (with 645 entities), consisting mainly of politically active groups worldwide. It included groups/pages linked to right-wing politics and pro-Trump movements in the United States, Europe, the Philippines, and Africa, except one Facebook group tied to the humanitarian cause in Kashmir. The central entities in the Russian network also included those that promote the anti-Western agenda, and several nonpolitical discussion groups in Africa and Asia. Like the Russian network, the network of Facebook groups/pages involved in coordinated sharing for regional challengers' outlets consisted of politically active Facebook groups. However, most central entities were affiliated with left-wing causes/groups in the United States and Europe, such as several groups advocating Free Palestine. Finally, the network of groups/pages promoting content from liberal democracies' outlets also consisted of political actors, but their political affiliation seemed varied, ranging from mostly progressive accounts to ostensibly Russian and Chinese information operations.

Agenda-Setting/Agenda-Following (RQ2a and RQ2b)

Recall that agenda-setting/agenda-following was measured by the extent to which the content of any pair of two outlets was similar within a selected time window. Two different and complementary metrics, from.Vprop and to.Vprop, identified agenda-setters and agenda-followers (Welbers & van Atteveldt, 2019). Table 6 shows agenda flows across geopolitical groups (expressed as edge-lists in the agenda flow network). Numbers in the from.Vprop column indicate the proportion of earlier posts in the from.Vprop group that matched with at least one later-posted content in the to.Vprop group. Ranked by from.Vprop, agendas that first appeared in regional challengers' outlets and liberal democracies' outlets predominantly flowed to outlets in revisionist world powers. The most salient agenda flow occurred between regional challengers and revisionist world powers. Eighteen percent of the first-published content by regional challengers' outlets were similar to later-published content in revisionist world powers' outlets. Alternatively, ranked by to.Vprop, the most significant content overlap was found between revisionist powers' outlets and outlets in the regional challengers and liberal democracies categories. Specifically, 22% of the later-published content by regional challengers' outlets was similar to earlier-published content by revisionist world powers' outlets. Taken together, regardless of which metric was used, the most evident agenda flows always involved outlets from revisionist world powers. However, the flow was bidirectional, in that while revisionist world powers' outlets closely followed agendas in other outlets, they also set agendas for others.

Table 6. Agenda Flows Across Geopolitical Groups.

from	to	from.Vprop	to.Vprop
Regional challengers	Revisionist world powers	**0.1844**	0.0932
Liberal democracies	Revisionist world powers	**0.1658**	0.0994
Regional challengers	Liberal democracies	0.1424	0.1414
Liberal democracies	Regional challengers	0.1161	0.1644
Revisionist world powers	Liberal democracies	0.0897	**0.2009**
Revisionist world powers	Regional challengers	0.0837	**0.2200**

Note. Top from.Vprop and to.Vprop values are in bold.

At the country level, Figure 7a shows the network of agenda flows, with the edge weight sized by from.Vprop. The table within Figure 7a shows the top 10 cross-country agenda flows ranked by from.Vprop. China appeared to be positioned at the center of the network as an agenda-follower, with its outlets on the receiving end of almost all top agenda flows. Chinese outlets were influenced to the greatest extent by agendas that first appeared in outlets in Germany, Qatar, Europe, Saudi Arabia, and Russia. By the metric to.Vprop (Figure 7b), China again is positioned at the center as an agenda-setter. As seen in all top agenda flows ranked by to.Vprop, Chinese outlets set agendas for outlets in Germany, Qatar, EU, and Turkey.

from	to	from.Vprop
Germany	China	0.2266
Qatar	China	0.1850
EU	China	0.1756
Saudi Arabia	China	0.1541
Russia	China	0.1504
Germany	Russia	0.1501
Israel	China	0.1498
Turkey	China	0.1462
Germany	USA	0.1461
USA	China	0.1441
Iran	China	0.1319
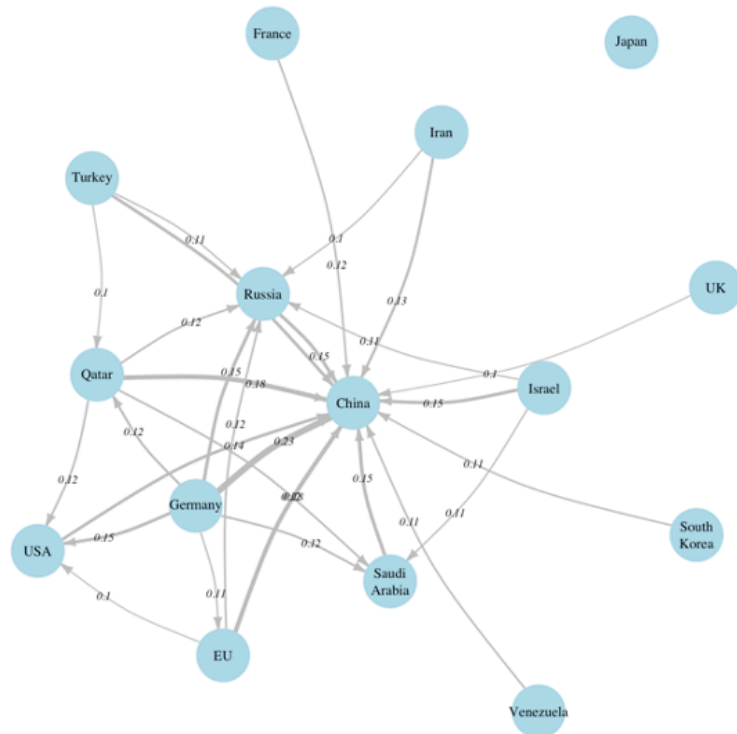
Figure 7a. Agenda flows across countries (ranked by from.Vprop).

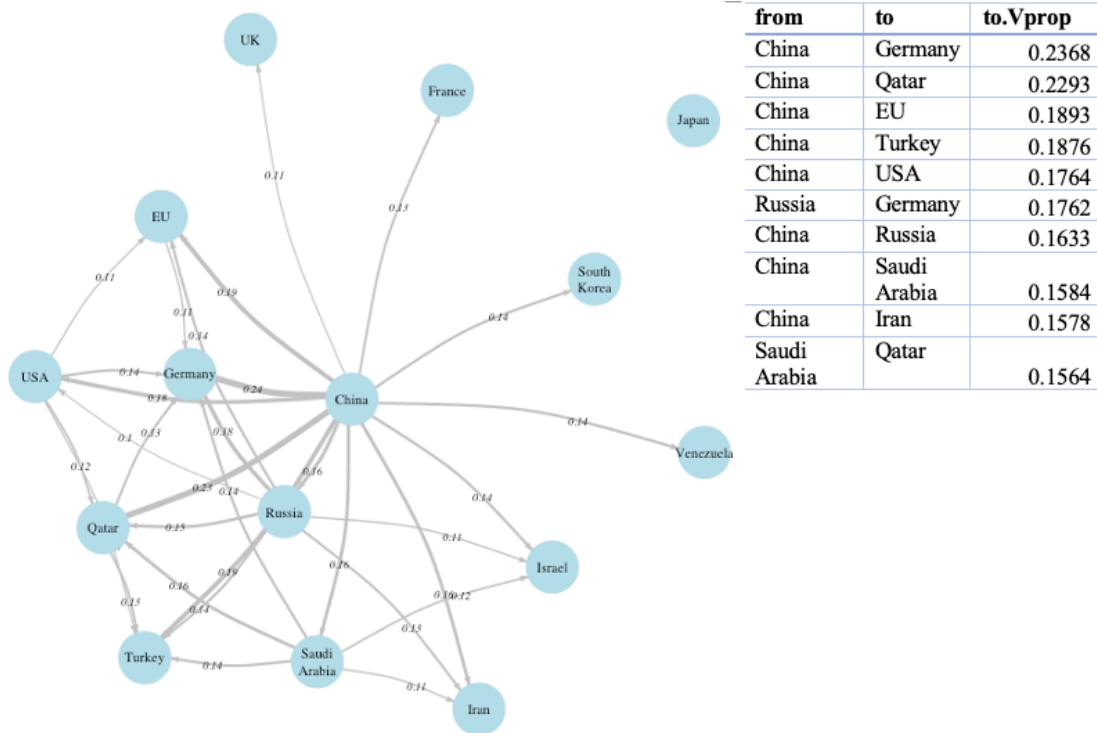| from	to	to.Vprop
China	Germany	0.2368
China	Qatar	0.2293
China	EU	0.1893
China	Turkey	0.1876
China	USA	0.1764
Russia	Germany	0.1762
China	Russia	0.1633
China	Saudi Arabia	0.1584
China	Iran	0.1578
Saudi Arabia	Qatar	0.1564

Figure 7b. Agenda flows across countries (ranked by to.Vprop).

Discussion

This study explores different aspects of digital practices and influences of state media across geopolitical players, from authoritarian and semi-authoritarian regimes to liberal democracies. To address the omission in the literature that focuses on a few typical actors, we seek to show the variety and interdependence of this global media ecosystem leveraged to project soft power. The study shows where and how much state media actors' digital investment and influence are expanding or curtailed. Next, we summarize major patterns that arose from study findings.

Aggressive but With Mixed Influences

The most scrutinized actors in this media ecosystem are those tied to Russia and China, two rising world powers challenging the Western dominance in global geopolitics. Our findings suggest that Russian and Chinese outlets are indeed more aggressive than their Western peers in content production. Although the data provide no direct insight into the motives behind such aggressive content investment, several factors seem plausible. First, because of the sheer size of their political and economic power, the two countries could be intrinsically newsworthy areas for global coverage. This is particularly true in 2020, considering China's role in the COVID-19 pandemic. Second, both countries' geopolitical ambitions are well-

known through launching, buying, and co-opting an extensive network of global news outlets ("China Is Using," 2019) and launching disruptive information operations in the digital space (Howard, 2020). Outlets in liberal democracies typically follow the public media model, which means they do not have direct government financing and could be subject to budget cuts and dwindling public support ("BBC News to Close," 2020). The Russian and Chinese outlets are arguably well funded and staffed to support their active content expansion. Third, Russia and China view themselves as underdogs in the global mediascape (Rawnsley, 2015). The positioning of their outlets as the alternative or new voices may spur the aggressive content investment to catch up with more established and reputable outlets. The aggressive content investment seems to have paid off in terms of attracting Facebook likes. However, their ability to drive sharing is lackluster; this assumes that an authentic, rather than a paid, audience drives Facebook likes and shares. The most popular content in the two countries' outlets appears to be limited to soft stories rather than hard political news. Although this finding alone is not necessarily a sign of failure, the Facebook audience may be aware of the outlets' state ties and propagandist nature, which may have discouraged sharing. It is also plausible that the popularity of the nonpolitical, soft news content shows the efficacy of the "tell China's story" approach, which focuses on the country's cultural coverage to plant the seed of admiration of Chinese culture (Rawnsley, 2015).

Speaking Up and Blending In

We found that Russian and Chinese outlets provide new agendas for outlets in other geopolitical categories. If the outlets are positioned as alternative media that provide regional perspectives of global affairs, the Russian and Chinese outlets appear to be winning by this measure. Simultaneously, the outlets' speaking up is accompanied by their close following of agendas in other global outlets. Put concisely, they (particularly the Chinese outlets) are as much agenda-setters as agenda-followers, which shows the level of interdependence and integration of the outlets in the global media system. We can consider several factors here: Agenda-following and -setting could reflect not so much strategic political communication, but the reality of newsworthiness. Given that the year 2020 was dominated by the COVID-19 coverage, it is no surprise that stories in China, where the virus was first reported, ended up with more coverage from various outlets. Additionally, both Russian and Chinese outlets brand themselves as alternatives to legacy global media giants such as the BBC and CNN. Such branding may require downplaying their regional roots and focusing more on comprehensive global coverage. Also noteworthy is the strong tie of agenda flows across different Chinese state media outlets, and similarly among Russian outlets. This suggests that the content from different outlets within respective state-media outlets are fairly homogeneous. Additionally, we observe the comparatively stronger agenda flow between RT and Press TV, CGTN and DW News, and CGTN and RT America. Despite much circumstantial evidence, this pattern appears to abide by the geopolitical reality of the closer political ties among Russia, China, and Iran, as well as China's closer ties with Europe amid the U.S.–China decoupling.

Ideological Alliances of Coordinated Sharing Networks

Coordinated link-sharing networks are a significant threat to digital spaces because of their inflation of public opinion and malicious use of platform algorithms. While the common perception is that ambitious geopolitical actors (especially those tied to authoritarian and semi-authoritarian regimes) are the most

motivated to manipulate algorithms, our finding suggests that this problematic behavior is not unique to outlets tied to revisionist world powers. Before we offer finding interpretations, we deem it critical to review several limitations in the design of the detection algorithm. The algorithm is relatively conservative in detecting coordinated link-sharing (meaning that only the most obvious actors are tagged for analysis). It means we are likely to miss out on a large proportion of potentially suspicious actors mobilized by state-affiliated outlets across regions. Moreover, it is not clear whether the state media directly control tagged suspicious entities. While CNN International's content seems to have been promoted by an extensive network of Facebook pages/groups in a near-simultaneous fashion, it is far less clear whether this network is directly created and run by CNN. Instead, this appears to be more likely a grassroots network of bot accounts set up by activists worldwide to share the outlets' content. With these limitations in mind, several distinct patterns warrant further investigation. First, the Chinese state media's coordination network is mostly homegrown and somewhat curtailed in its reach. The coordinated link-sharing appears to be limited to within Chinese outlets and to a small number of accounts in Africa and Southeast Asia. However, it is not clear why political groups in Indonesia and Malaysia are involved. It could reflect China's sphere of influence in the region or the fact that these political activist groups are directly bought and controlled by China-affiliated state actors. The Russian outlets seem to have the support (authentic or inauthentic) from numerous right-wing, anti-West, counter-mainstream political groups worldwide. It appears that Russia's long-known strategy of divide-and-conquer has paid off in its mobilization of politically charged online fringe groups. The network mobilized by outlets of regional challengers (notably Iran and Venezuela) is notably left-leaning and thriving on Middle Eastern humanitarian issues. Again, this seems to support these outlets' counter-Western and regional-focused mission. Overall, while focusing on their respective counties' narratives and interests, state-affiliated outlets appear to have been well integrated into foreign countries' local politics. What is particularly alarming is the distinct ideological alliance of the political right with Russian outlets. This alliance could be a strategic move to dismantle political opposition in Western democracies to serve Russia's foreign interest.

In summary, state-affiliated media are becoming an increasingly salient part of the global media ecosystem, and the West versus non-West divide in influence appears to be receding. Nondemocratic, politically ambitious actors' outlets are catching up aggressively, with a notable level of content investment and online political groups' mobilization for coordinated sharing, even though such efforts may not always translate into substantial digital influences. While their growing expansion of content and influence is something to consider when gauging digital spaces' overall health, a key and often overlooked aspect is how these outlets may have formed an ideological alliance with ostensibly local grassroots political groups across the political spectrum.

Limitations and Future Directions

This study provides an explanatory note on state media's role in digital information disorder, and we caution our readers about several limitations of the study. First, we are constrained by the design of the algorithms used in identifying agenda-setting and agenda-following. Despite this automated approach's state-of-the-art design, the algorithm is not equipped to detect major framing differences across countries and outlets. Much of the strategic political communication aimed at projecting national interest lies in how different outlets frame the same agendas. Second, the year 2020 may prove to be an outlier (despite having

provided many critical geopolitical events for observation) because of the high level of geopolitical contention by the COVID-19 and the U.S.–China diplomatic rows. Third, our interpretations of the findings are based on educated premises supported by the data and prior studies and investigative reports. Mapping the motives of these state actors requires in-depth interviews and in-depth policy analyses. Based on the gaps, we advocate for two critical future studies: (1) a study that looks at the coverage in a less geopolitically contentious year; and (2) a study that uses a combination of automated and manual approaches to study framing differences across the outlets.

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