Charmers or Wolf Warriors?
Examining China's Diplomatic Twitter Presence

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Research question and Background

Has China's increasing social media presence changed its public diplomacy strategy in recent years? Is Chinese foreign propaganda online becoming more assertive and combative, especially on contentious political issues?

- Scholars have looked at Chinese diplomats' increased presence on social media, focusing on how users engage in these networks [1] and how they promote pro-Chinese narratives (while attacking opposing views) [2]
- We examine the link between China's diplomatic presence on social media and its public diplomacy strategy: whether Chinese diplomats are engaging in a more combative and aggressive style of "wolf warrior diplomacy" online

Figure 1. Example of combative tweet by Chinese diplomat

Trends on Twitter

- **Increased activity during Covid-19**: almost a quarter of Chinese diplomatic Twitter accounts (33 of 135) were created during or after March 2020, and the most frequently tweeted word is "covid"
- Mostly retweets, with some original posts and very little replied to
- Top retweeted accounts are Chinese state-affiliated news organizations: Xinhua News, CGTN, People's Daily

The trends suggest that the main functions of Chinese diplomatic Twitter accounts are 1) to propagate the Chinese official position expressed in Chinese state media content and 2) to voice informal opinion that could not be conveyed through official media.
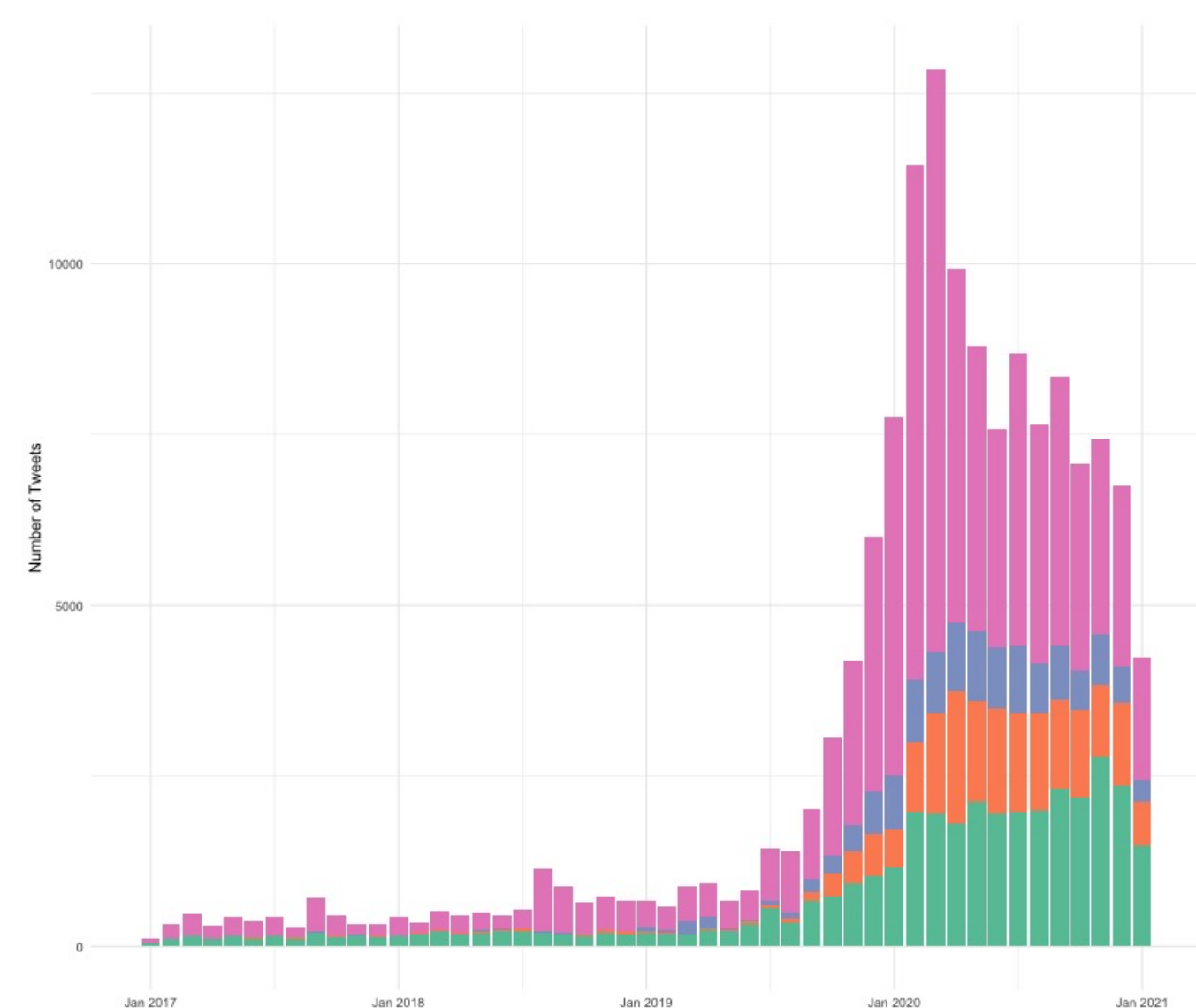

Figure 2. Total number of tweets by Chinese diplomatic accounts arranged by tweet type

Data and Methods

Chinese diplomatic accounts on Twitter have expanded dramatically since 2019, from fourteen accounts by the end of 2018,[3] to over two hundred today – offering an ideal space to learn about the trends and traits of Chinese foreign-oriented propaganda in the digital age.

Twitter data were collected over the period **January 2017 to January 2021** using the academic API. The final dataset contains over **140,000 tweets**, including original posts, retweets, quotes, and replies, for **135 unique Chinese diplomatic Twitter accounts**.

To examine how aggressive or combative Chinese diplomatic accounts are, we analyzed tweet sentiments using the **Valence Aware Dictionary and sEntiment Reasoner (VADER)** [4], which is specifically catered towards social media content. In addition to looking at all tweets, we focused on specific politically contentious topics, such as Covid and Hong Kong, to see if sentiments change.

Using the stm package in R, we also estimated a structural topic model to extract topics from Covid-related tweets by Chinese diplomatic accounts.
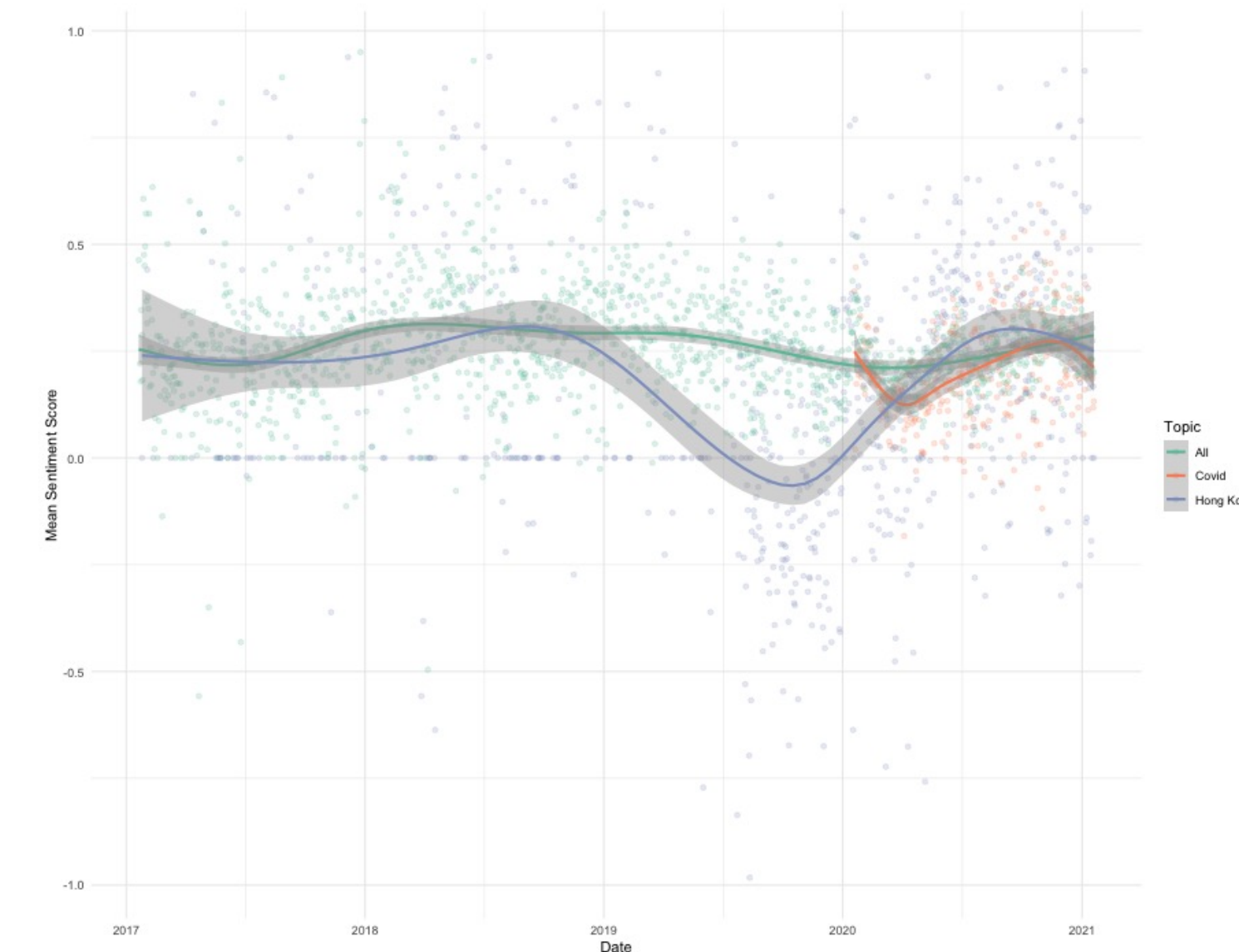
Results

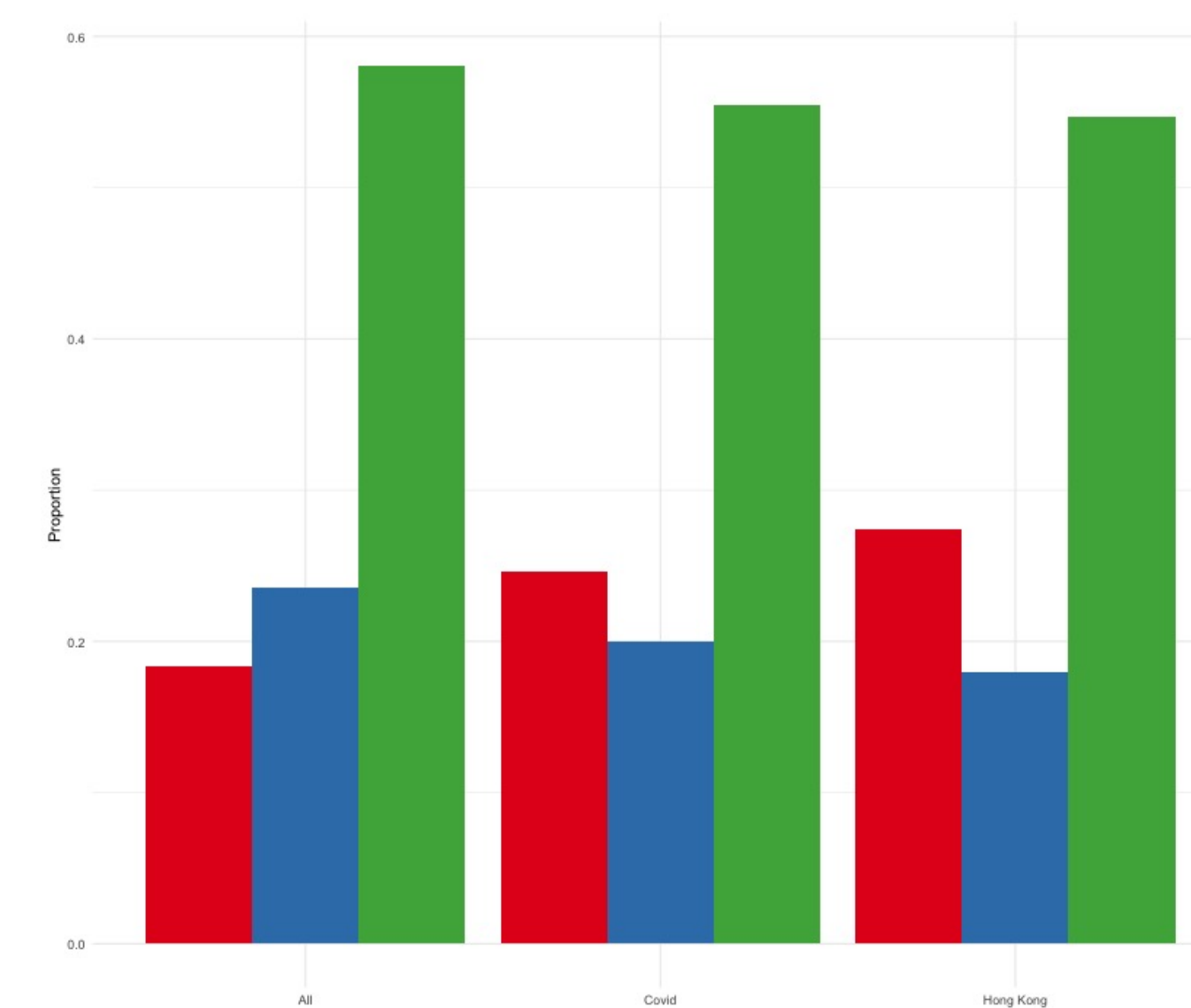Figure 3. Sentiment Analysis of Chinese Diplomat Account Tweets by Topic

Figure 4. Proportions of positive, negative, and neutral tweets by topic
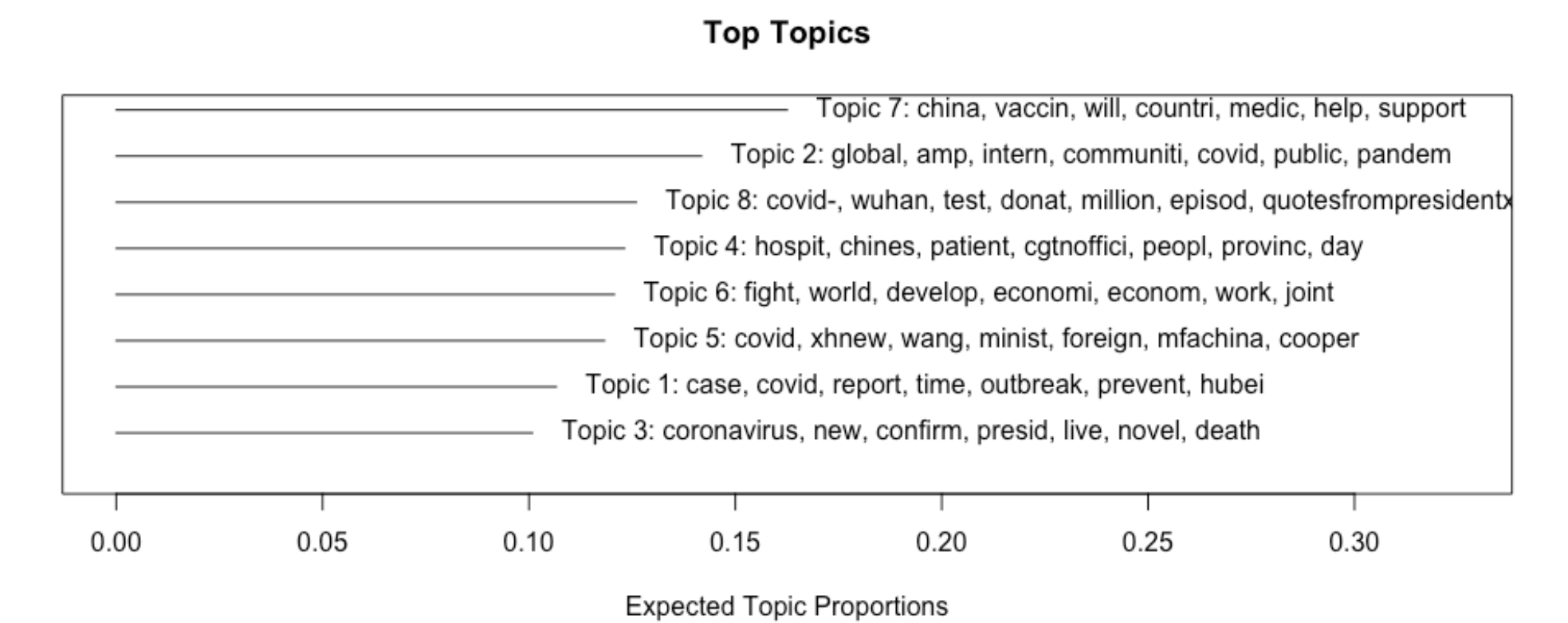
Results (cont'd)

Figure 5. Top topics from Covid-related tweets

Summary of Findings

- **Overall sentiment of tweets by Chinese diplomatic accounts are positive**, even on controversial political subjects like Covid-19 and Hong Kong.
- **Tweet sentiments do change over time**, as evidenced by slight dips in Hong Kong tweet sentiments between 2019-2020, when protests erupted in Hong Kong in response to more restrictive laws on democracy, and in COVID tweet sentiments around March 2020, when the virus started to spread to other parts of the world and when the blame game began. However, the negativity was transitory and soon bounced back to a more positive state.
- We also see **positive frames that present China as cooperative and competent**. The most common topics from Covid-related tweets emphasize Chinese medical diplomacy — that China is a positive force in the global fight against the pandemic — and China's domestic efforts to fight the virus.
- Preliminary analyses suggest that **Chinese diplomatic Twitter accounts are not particularly combative or aggressive**, implying that China's public diplomacy strategy has not significantly shifted toward wolf warrior style tactics (at least on social media).

Next Steps

We plan to create a coding scheme to determine how aggressive tweets by Chinese diplomatic are. Using the coded tweets, we will employ machine learning to classify and predict which tweets are more or less aggressive forms of Chinese foreign propaganda on social media.

References

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