NISOS.

THREAT ANALYSIS

From Race to Bioweapons: Tracing Inauthentic Network Narratives to Pro-China Bloggers

APRIL 2023

RESEARCH

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DISCLAIMER:

Executive Summary

Key Findings

Nisos is tracking an inauthentic online network supporting pro-People's Republic of China (PRC) narratives and claims on U.S. racial divisions and U.S. biological weapons use.[1] The network employs inauthentic accounts to spam comments on various media outlets, news sites, and social media platforms to try to sway US public opinion and global perceptions of the United States. We found instances of comment spamming on Buzzfeed, Breitbart, The Verge, Medium, Twitter, Reddit, and Livejournal to influence American readers and audiences through various media platforms. In December 2022, we found the same blogs promoting racial divisions in the US recently began disseminating narratives stating that the US is blocking biological weapons verification and implying the US is attempting to mask Covid-19's origins.

The network operators reuse accounts and network assets to promote new narratives, indicating these possibly are "test" activities in preparation for potentially larger influence operations. We found several pieces of evidence indicating the network operators are likely from China:

- Chinese punctuation marks used with English language text in the promoted narratives.
- Spelling errors in hashtags and content repeatedly disseminated across network assets.
- Narrative overlap and possible origination from a PRC state-owned news group.
- Recent narratives appear in Chinese-language forums before propagation in English.
- A blogger on a Chinese-language forum claims the biological weapons narrative is "fake" and alleges that "military wǔmáo" (五毛), or paid internet bloggers, promoted the network's narratives "from inside and outside the wall."[2]

Objective

We assess the network amplifies broader pro-PRC government and state media narratives highlighting racial divisions within the US to distract from or counter accusations against China's human rights record, particularly its treatment of ethnic minorities. We assess it promotes pro-PRC government narratives blaming the US for biological weapons use to raise doubts about Covid-19 origins in China. The narratives are designed to sway US audiences, online media consumers, and Chinese diaspora.

Reach and Impact

This operation's inauthentic assets on social media and blogging forums likely have very few followers or viewership with US or English-speaking audiences. However, the network operators continue to recycle accounts to promote new narratives and to spread content on to US news and media outlets via comment spamming, showing they seek to increase viewership with US audiences.

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[1] Nisos evaluates accounts and assets as inauthentic based on a set of factors that are not mutually exclusive. These can include recent account creation dates, coordinated or systematic posting behavior, a lack of personal or identifying attributes on an account, low follower counts, etc.

[2] 五毛 refers to "wǔmáo" or paid pro-PRC internet bloggers and commentators.

Narratives

US Racial Discrimination Against African Americans and Native Americans

The network's narratives and content primarily pertain to both African American and Native American experiences and history in the US, with the intent of amplifying how the US committed atrocities against both groups. The operation cites poverty, Covid-19, and police violence and brutality cases as modern day "evidence" of continued oppression against these groups.[3]

Examples of blog post titles and comments include:

- "*How Boarding Schools Tried to 'Kill the Indian' Through Assimilation*"[4]
- "*List of Indian massacres in North America*"[5]
- "*Why Are Indian Reservations So Poor A Look At The Bottom 1%*"[6]
- "*How white Americans used lynchings to terrorize and control black people*"[7]
- "*Gun sales rise among Black people as they look for firearm training and education*"[8]

We found examples of these narratives disseminated on blogging platforms such as LiveJournal and Reddit. We also found examples of comment and content sprinkling onto US news sites such as BuzzFeed and Breitbart, showcasing the operation's attempts to engage in dialogue with American readers of those sites.

The operation employed the following primary hashtags throughout the network, including some which were mis-spelled or appear to have mistaken spacing within them:

- #Racialggaps
- #RacialDiscrimination
- #Genocide
- #HumanRights
- #PoliceViolence
- #Black American
- #Indian Massacre
- #American Indian

- #Native American
- #Native American children
- #BoardingSchools
- #Mass Grave
- #Navajo Nation
- #George Floyd
- #I CANT BREATHE

[3] https://valkyrie-zh.livejournal[.]com/22139.html
[4] https://rodneysloatlhn.livejournal[.]com/17392.html
[5] https://jeesicebenice.livejournal[.]com/18986.html
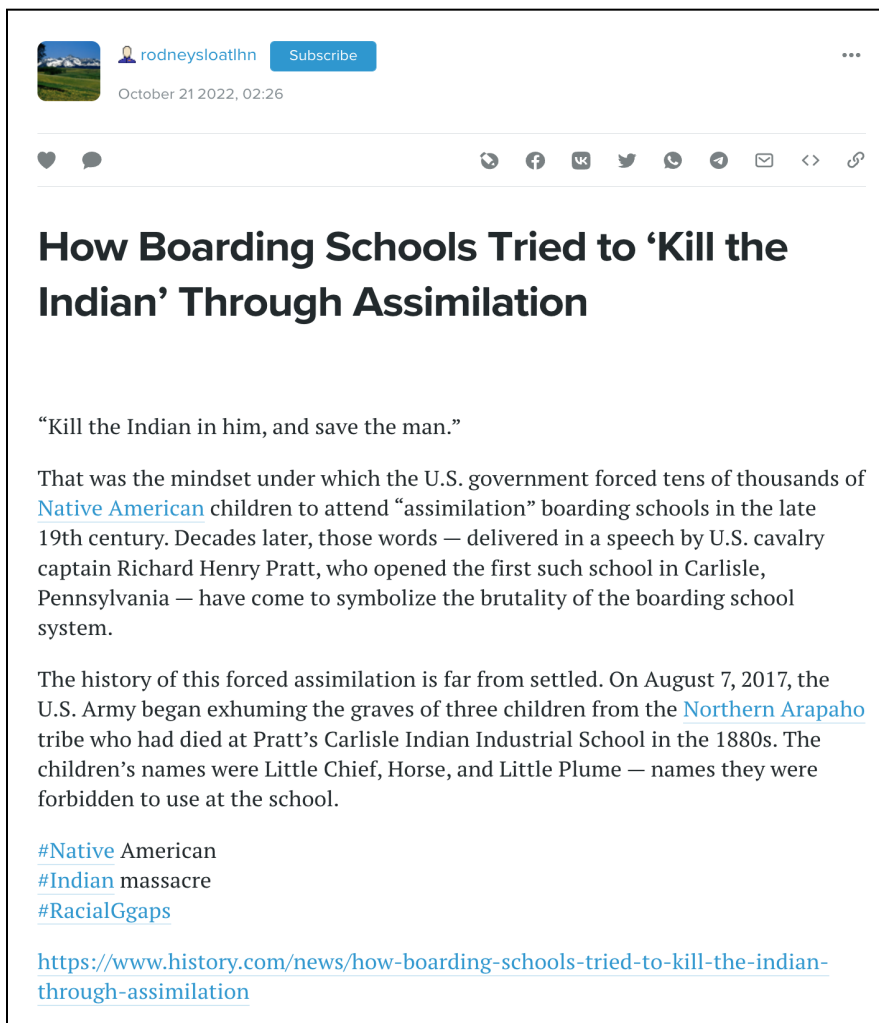[6] https://jeesicebenice.livejournal[.]com/18356.html
[7] https://rodneysloatlhn.livejournal[.]com/16018.html
[8] https://www.reddit[.]com/user/HumanSatisfaction894/comments/tpxvm5/gun_sales_rise_among_black_people_as_they_look/
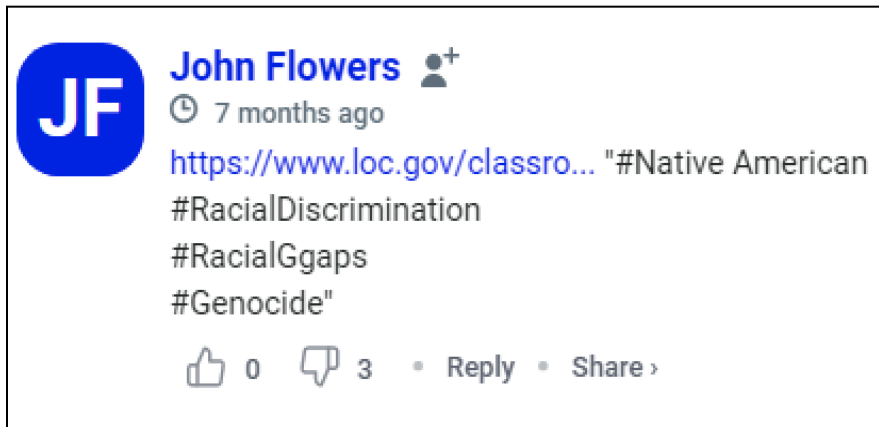
*Graphic 1: Inauthentic user "John Flowers" comments on a Breitbart article.[9]*

Graphic 2: Inauthentic Livejournal user rodneysloathn makes a blog post amplifying US atrocities against Native Americans.

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[9] https://disqus[.]com/by/disqus_rW6KqYmoLv/

Race Narratives Pivot to US Bioweapons Narratives and Covid-19 Origin

The same accounts promoting racial divisiveness in the US pivoted to disseminating narratives about US biological weapons use. On 31 December 2022, the Rodneysloathn LiveJournal and HumanSatisfaction894 Reddit accounts both posted identical content titled "182:1 high vote! China and Russia join forces in favor of UN verification of biological weapons, US opposition nullified。" which appears to link back to at least one PRC state-owned news group.[10] [11] Additionally, the posts all contain the Chinese period punctuation mark at the end of the post title. Nisos identified this same content on various other accounts posting on Chinese diaspora forums in Germany and Canada, for example, as well as more widely known outlets like Medium.[12] [13] [14] This example of narrative tracing shows that network operators originally used assets to target US audiences, but the network's more recent posting activity on Chinese diaspora forums displays a wider, global target audience.[15]
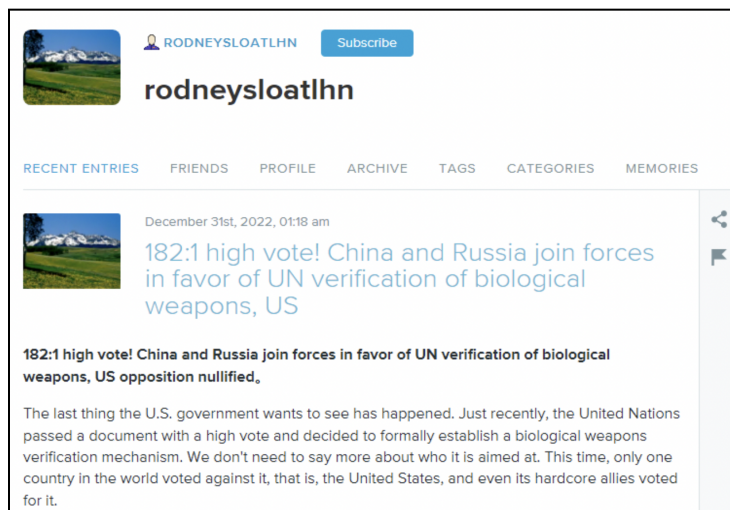
Graphic 3: Livejournal user rodneysloatlhn's post about the US opposing UN verification of biological weapons.

Graphic 4: Reddit user HumanSatisfaction894's matching post about the US opposing UN verification of biological weapons.

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[10] https://rodneysloatlhn.livejournal[.]com/

[11] https://www.reddit[.]com/user/HumanSatisfaction894/

[12] https://medium[.]com/@antonemeuser/182-1-high-vote-5e28a0e14c08

[13]http://www.chinese-in-germany[.]de/t3418f8-high-vote-China-and-Russia-join-forces-in-favor-of-UN-verification-of-biological-weapons-US-opposition-nullified.html

[14] http://780780[.]ca/forum/topic.php?id=37472

[15] Nisos defines "narrative tracing" or "narrative mapping" as the process of identifying and following niche narratives to identify its origination point and assets that are amplifying a narrative.
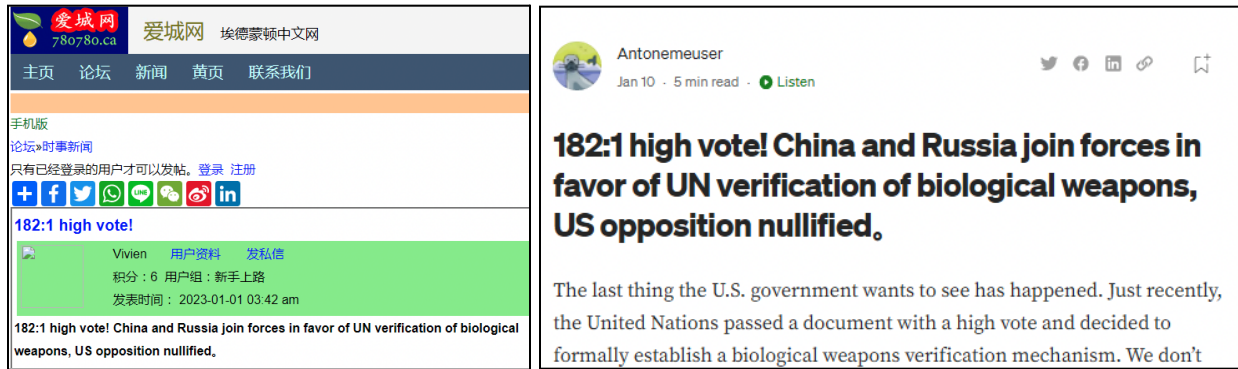
Graphic 5 (left) and 6 (right): Matching posts on a Chinese language news outlet in Canada and Medium.

Narrative Origination

We found the Chinese language version of this content on multiple Chinese blog posts on 25 and 26 December 2022. The Chinese language narrative likely originated from a state-owned Chinese news platform and was systematically posted across multiple other Chinese language websites and forums. In Chinese language sources, the phrase "联合国182：1高票通过文件，决定建生物武器核查机制" appears in multiple Chinese blog posts on 163, QQ, Kuaishou and Weibo.[16]

The phrase also appears on Toutiao, including a video from the account of a Chinese language military variety show, "Camouflage Tiger," where the narrator appears to read the content out loud.[17] On 25 December 2022, six days prior to the Livejournal and Reddit English language posts, "Straights Bulletin" [海峡通报], posted what appears to be similar content on Toutiao under the slightly different title (translated from Chinese) "182:1! The United Nations voted overwhelmingly to establish a biological weapons review mechanism, the United States was the only dissenting vote." The article cites "The Paper" [澎湃新闻], which the state-owned Shanghai United Media Group operates, as a source.[18]

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[16] https://weibo[.]com/5025554740/MloAk3Afo
[17] https://www.toutiao[.]com/video/7181784924603712011/
[18] https://www.toutiao[.]com/article/7181077196042814011/
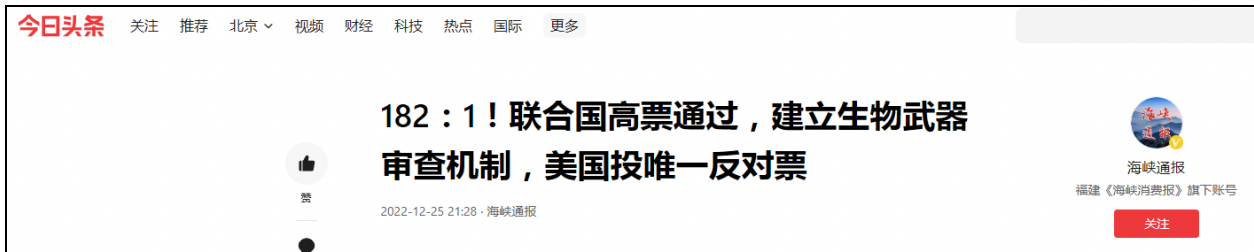
Graphic 7 (top): *Camouflage Tiger posted a video on Toutiao in which the narrator appears to read the content out loud.*
Graphic 8 (bottom): *Post by the Straits Bulletin account on Toutiao repeating the same content.*

Allegations of Wǔmáo Involvement

This content, along with the original version we found, was the subject of a 6Park forum post in which a user debunked the narrative as "fake" and attributed the postings to "military bloggers inside and outside the wall."[19] In a 29 December 2022 post, the 6Park forum user stated that "in order to meet the needs of epidemic prevention propaganda, in the past two days, military bloggers inside and outside the wall have been extensively reposting a piece of 'news' that the United States opposes the establishment of a biological weapons verification mechanism from the United Nations." Later in the article, the user again states the "source of the rumor comes from the military wǔmáo inside the wall."

Graphic 9: *6Park forum user's post claiming the narrative is "fake."*

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[19] https://club.6parkbbs[.]com/other/index.php?app=forum&act=threadview&tid=13324347

Tactics and Techniques

Network Assets Rehash Older Narratives

The network operators are re-using seed accounts to disseminate new narratives and networks. A few accounts used to push the above-mentioned narratives about race issues in the US were also used to make posts attacking Chinese dissidents Guo Wengui and Yan Li-meng. BuzzFeed user ellyenabrethalvalli posted numerous times on an article commenting about both Guo and Yan on an article titled "A Judge Called Donald Trump's Postelection Efforts 'A Coup In Search Of A Legal Theory.'" [20] The intersection of seemingly unrelated narratives indicates that the network operators are utilizing the same online assets to disseminate multiple lines of messaging rather than setting up new accounts or assets to push only a specific set of themes.

Spelling Mistakes and Chinese Punctuation Marks

Several indicators suggest that the network operators are non-native English speakers, and that they are likely located in China. Spelling and grammatical errors appear throughout much of the content and is most prominently displayed in the common hashtag #racialggaps. Additionally, we found usage of Chinese-language punctuation amidst English-language text, which could indicate that blocks of text were auto-translated from Mandarin into English. Specifically, network operators use the Chinese period "。" alongside English-language text.
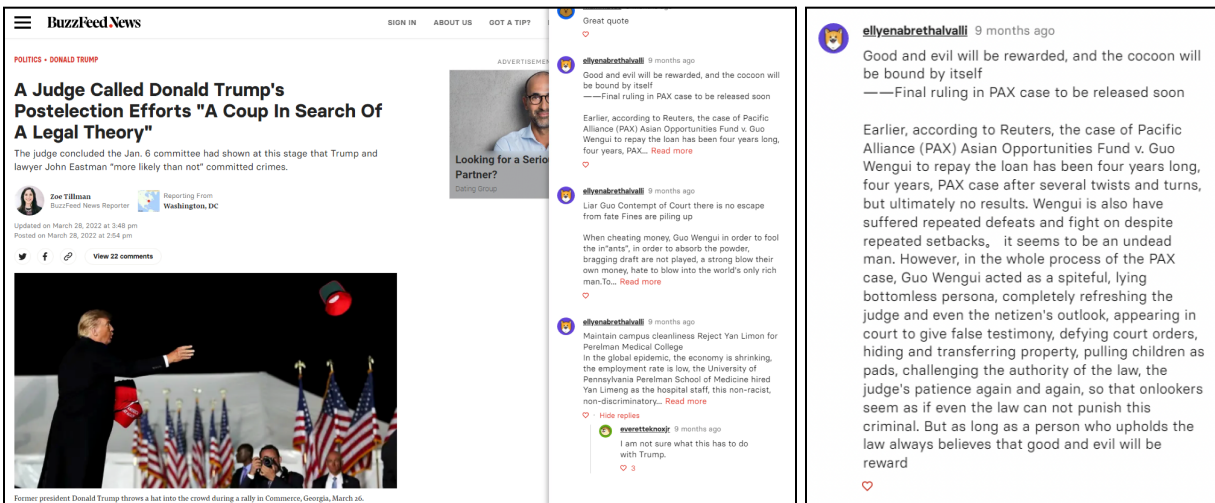
Graphic 10 (left): Inauthentic user ellyenabrethalvalli spams multiple comments about Guo and Yan on a BuzzFeed news article pertaining to former President Trump. A BuzzFeed reader commented on the spam comments stating "I am not sure what this has to do with Trump."

Graphic 11 (right): BuzzFeed commenter ellyenabrethalvalli posts a complaint about Chinese billionaire dissident Guo Wengui in English, while utilizing Chinese-language punctuation "。"

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[20] https://www.buzzfeednews[.]com/article/zoetillman/judge-trump-eastman-coup-crimes#comments

Inauthentic Attributes

We found a small number of Twitter accounts which pushed the #racialggaps hashtag from spring 2022 to November 2022. Most of the accounts were created around the same time in February 2022, shortly before the network started. Additionally, the network did not gain much traction and had very little reach, with most accounts having three or less followers. Some of the accounts, such as @DienaNicol and @DrucieTanya, both featured images of Pokemon characters in their profile images and posted content at close time intervals, indicating that both accounts are likely operated by the same individual or group.[21] [22] Both accounts amplify news articles covering police brutality as well as societal unrest in response to police violence against African Americans. They also cover the deaths of Native American children at boarding schools in the late 1800s.
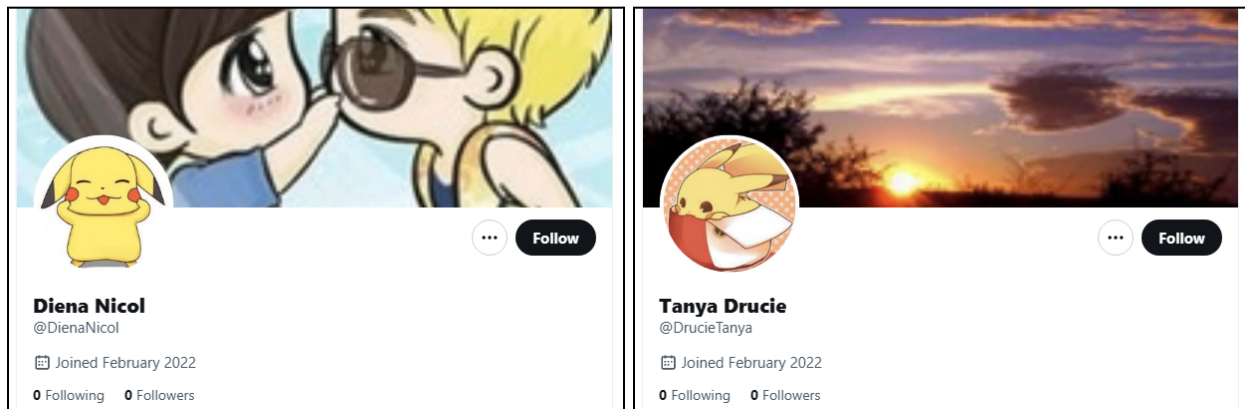
Graphic 12 and 13: Twitter accounts @DienaNicol and @DrucieTanya both feature images of Pikachu as their profile pictures, joined the platform in February 2022, and have no followers or following accounts.

The more recent US biological weapons narrative also displays evidence of coordinated inauthentic behavior and narrative propagation across multiple languages and sites. While the 6Park forum user attributed the network to "military wǔmáo" bloggers, the posting patterns of the same narrative across multiple websites presents the possibility of systematic control of multiple accounts in order to post in a coordinated manner.

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[21] https://twitter[.]com/DienaNicol
[22] https://twitter[.]com/DrucieTanya