Blazing Red, Paper White

An analysis of how YouTube mediates China's White Paper Protest

Introduction to the research

From the first covid wave in 2020, China has faced some of the most draconian covid lockdowns. Upon the re-election of Xi Jinping as the leader of Chinese Communist Party (CCP) in October 2022, tensions escalated and social unrest began to surface. Amongst the protests, a blank sheet of A4 paper assumed the symbol and an umbrella term for the nationwide dissents. Echoing its predecessor in the 2019 Hong Kong protest, the “white paper” represents what protesters wish to say but cannot due to strict censorship. It presents a dilemma to the CCP authorities – whether to repress the protesters for saying literally nothing.

This research investigates how YouTube mediates the full range of the event following a chronological order, starting from two queries in English and Chinese. We ask: How timely was the protest “reported”? How is the protest presented by channels within the bilingual spheres and their corresponding political standing? How are the protest-related videos mediated by co-watching history and recommendation algorithms?
Two datasets (2082 English videos and 480 Chinese videos posted Oct 13 2022 - Jan 09 2023) were generated by two queries with similar meaning –“China Covid Protest” and “封控抗议 (Lock-down Protest)”, offering various insights into how YouTube mediates China's white paper protest within the bilingual sphere.

Preliminary findings

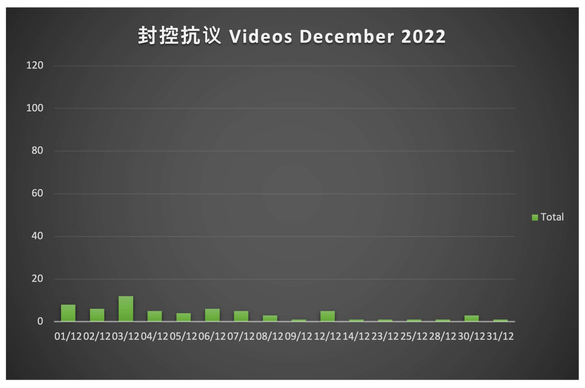
Chinese dataset:
The most active Chinese-speaking channels:

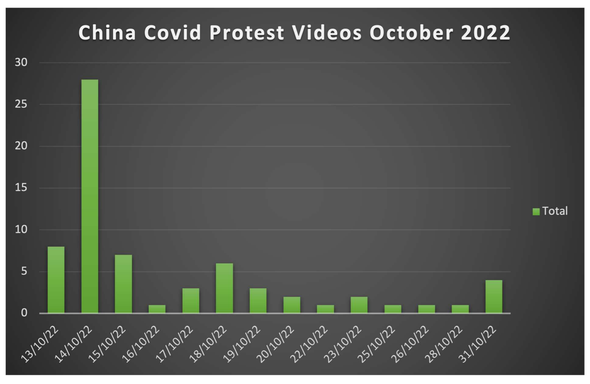
1. Main regions: US, Japan (新球电台 Jun 11, 2022), UK (BBC), Taiwan
2. The number of posts don’t necessarily align with views or numbers of subscribers
3. formats/genres: serious news reporting, commentary, live shorts without editing
4. The top fifth most viewed video is from a personal blog(國強啊國強) with 3.69k subscribers

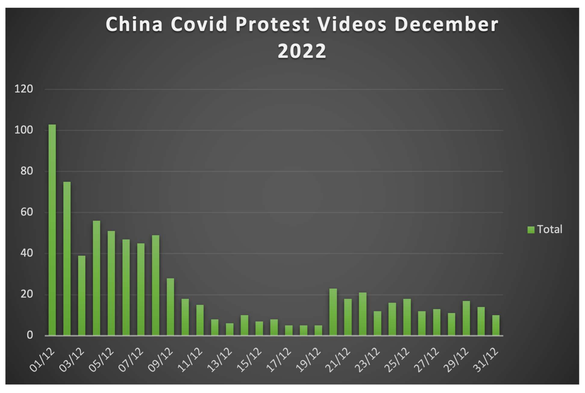
English dataset:

1. Most active media outlets are Indian with daily detailed coverage
2. Top 5 most viewed videos don’t align with the most active channels
3. Top viewed videos contain neither personal blogs nor young channels

Two language spheres are connected by co-watching history and recommendation algorithms. Surprisingly, the channels that “bridge” the two spheres are mostly small personal channels with certain videos that went viral.







13.10.2022

Sitongqiao Protest in Beijing

16.10.2022

The 20th National Congress of the CCP in Beijing

23.10.2022

Xi Jinping was officially re-elected

14.11.2022

Guangzhou Protest due to strict Covid lockdowns

22.11.2022

24.11.2022

A deadly fire killed at least 10 people in Urumqi (the direct trigger of the subsequent protests)

24.11.2022-25.11.2022

Urumqi protest

26.11.2022

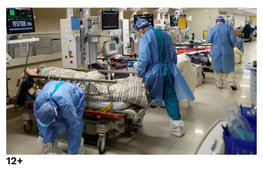
A student from Nanjing began the white paper protest

26.11.2022

Shanghai holds vigil and protest on Urumqi Middle Rd

07.12.2022

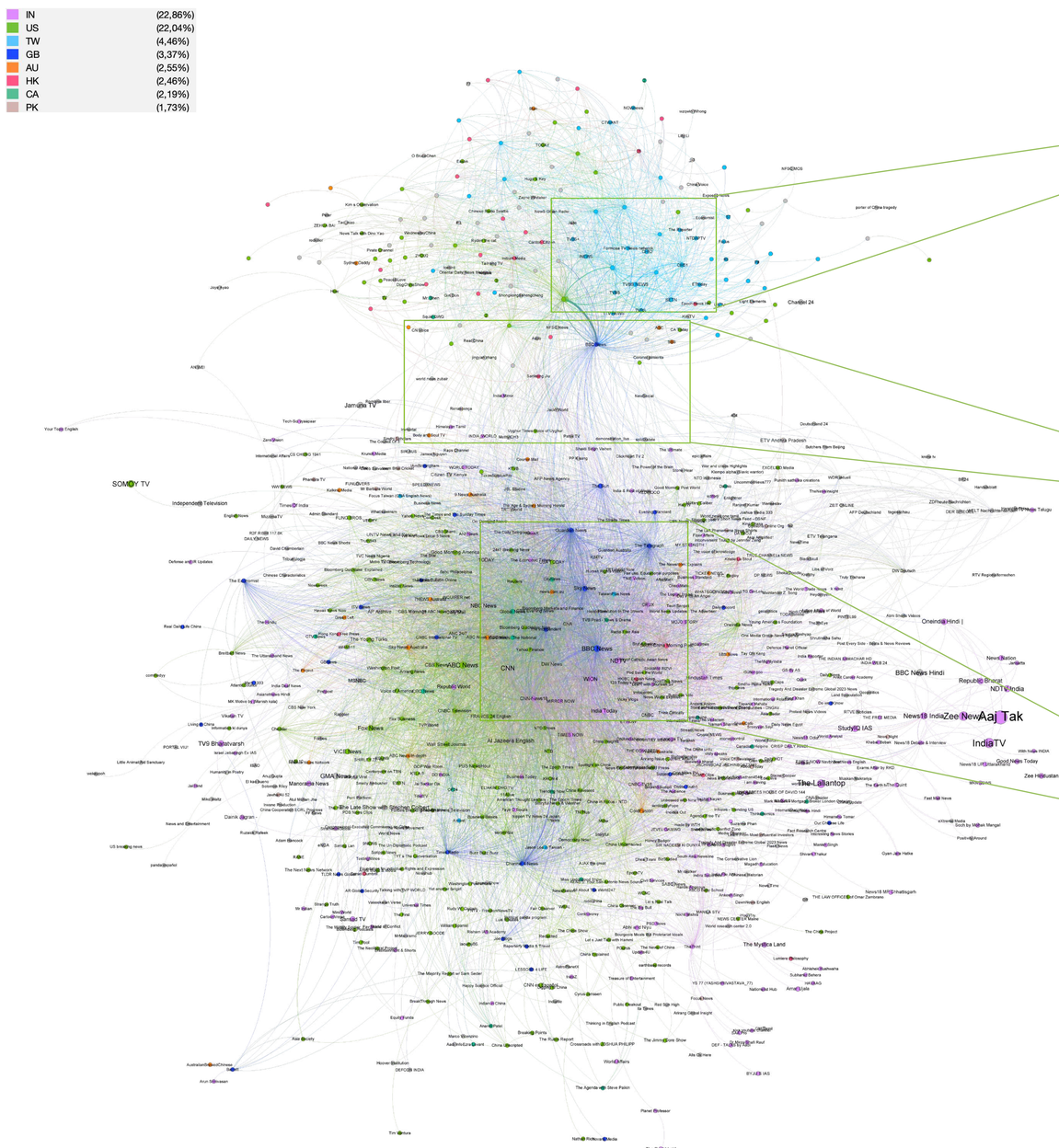
New Covid prevention policy “New Ten Articles” was issued



12+

Large-scale Covid outbreak in China since the relaxation of Covid measures

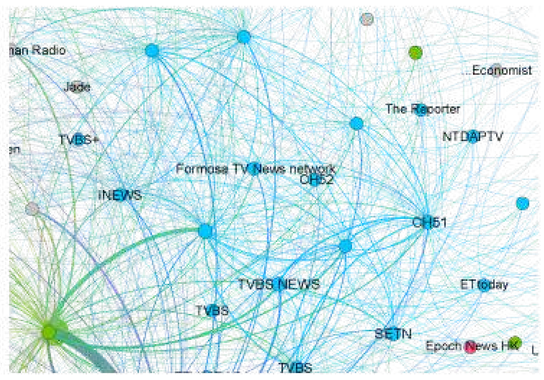
Channel Network Visualization based on video recommendation relations



Zoom 1

Up cluster - Chinese query videos

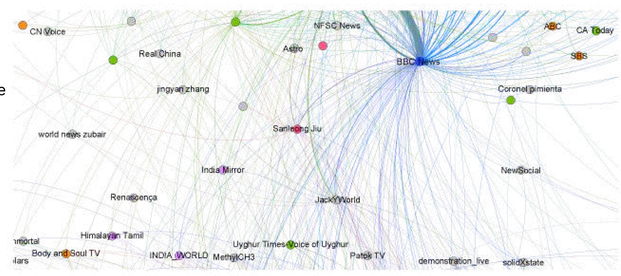
Central channels: Taiwanese news organizations



Zoom 2

The “bridging channel” between two language clusters

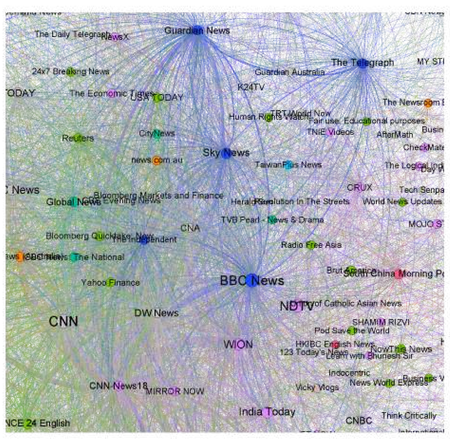
- Mostly personal blog accounts (with viral videos)
- Also some news organizations



Zoom 3

Down cluster - English query videos

Central channels: India (burgundy), US (green), UK (dark blue) news organizations



Participants

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