
Refugees Welcomed? A Computational Approach to Identifying and Documenting Toxic Anti-Immigrant Narratives on Twitter Against Ukrainian Refugees

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Case Study: Refugees Fleeing Ukraine

- On Feb 24, 2022, Russia invaded Ukraine, forcing a large number of refugees to leave the country in search of safety and security.
- As of Feb 2023, >8M refugees from Ukraine were recorded across Europe ([the UN Refugee Agency](#)).
- This case study examines the anti-immigrant and anti-refugee narratives on social media (Twitter).

Research Questions



RQ1: Which thematic narratives are frequently present in toxic tweets concerning Ukrainian refugees?



RQ2: What types of users are involved in toxic replies, either as targets or instigators?

By understanding the language and sentiment of anti-immigrant and anti-refugee narratives, we can develop effective strategies to counteract potentially harmful discourses on social media.



Automated Toxicity Analysis

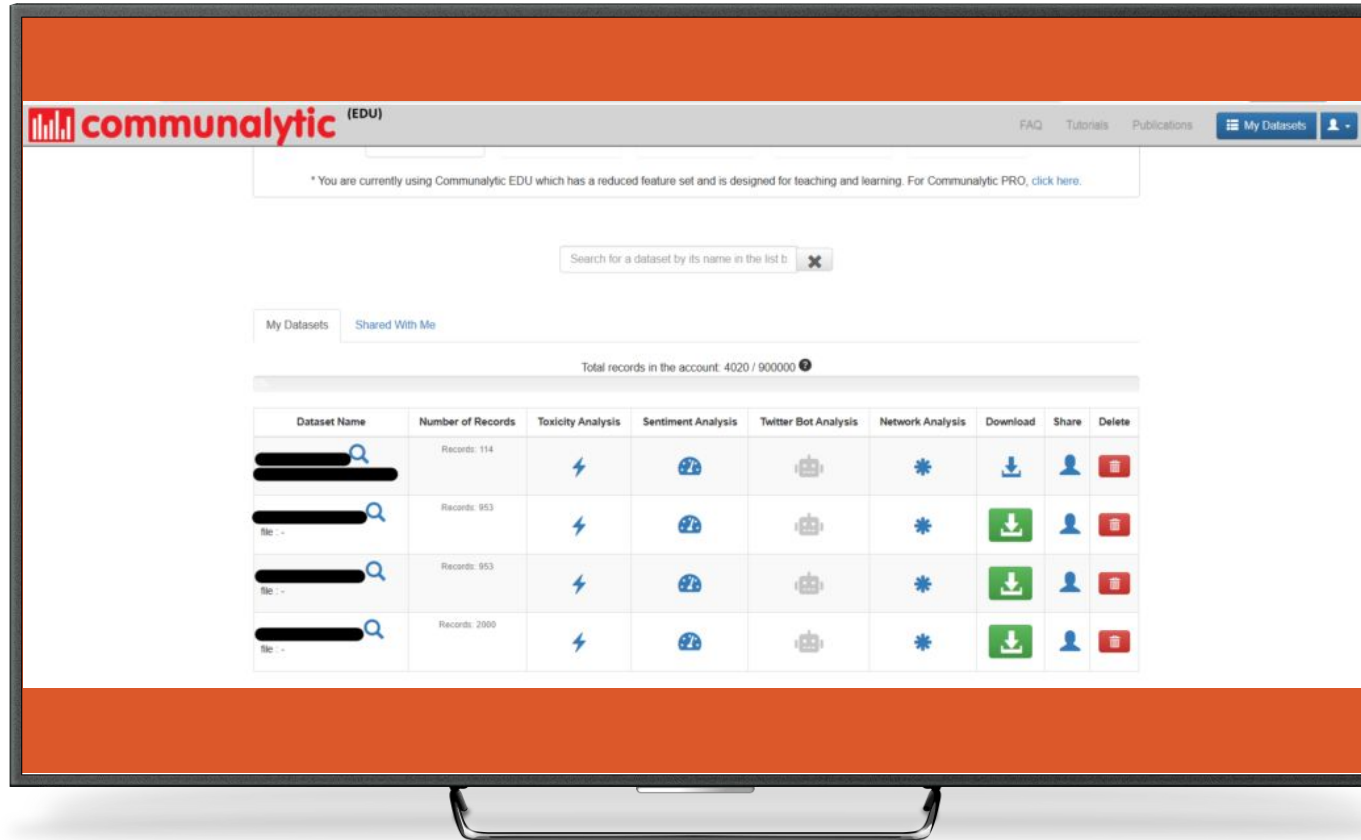
via Google's Perspective API

- Toxicity
- Severe toxicity
- Insult
- **Identity attack**
- Profanity
- Threat

Assessment of toxic language attacking someone based on identity (nationality, race, gender, sexual orientation, ideology, religion ...)

Communalytic

A research tool developed by TMU's Social Media Lab for studying online communities and discourse



Communalytic can collect, analyze, and visualize public data from social media (e.g. Reddit, Telegram, Twitter) or CSV/JSON files.

<https://communalytic.org>

Data Collection and Analysis

We collected **811,933** tweets between Feb. 24, 2022
(start date of Russia's invasion of Ukraine) and March 31, 2023

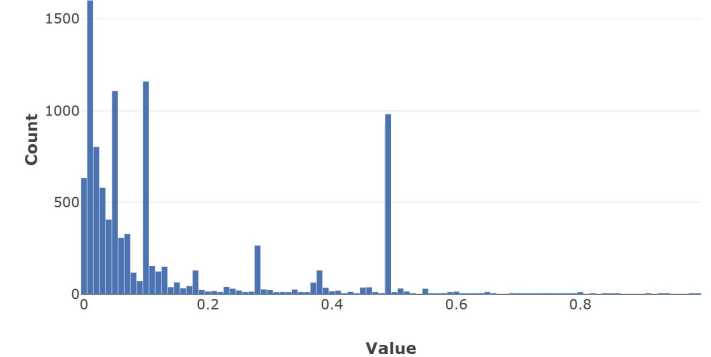
7,497 tweets received the 'identity attack'
score over 0.6

3,143 tweets (original posts
or replies), after excluding
retweets

SEARCH QUERY:

(Ukraine OR Украина OR Україна OR Ucraina OR Україні OR Ucrânia OR
Ucrania OR Oekraïne) (immigrant OR refugee OR "asylum seeker" OR
иммигрант OR беженец OR проситель убежища OR іммігрант OR біженець
OR шукач притулку OR Flüchtling OR Asylbewerber OR réfugié OR demandeur
d'asile OR rifugiato OR richiedente asilo OR přistěhovalc OR uprchlík OR
žadatel o azyl OR requerente de asilo OR refugiado OR solicitante de asilo OR
vluchteling OR asielzoeker)

Identity Attack Scores Distribution Chart



Research Questions / Method



RQ1: Which thematic narratives are frequently present in toxic tweets concerning Ukrainian refugees?

Conducted a manual content analysis on 10% of 3,143 tweets w/Identity Attack score > 0.6

** Future Work - Analyze all 3,143 tweets w/Identity Attack score of > 0.6*



RQ2: What types of users are involved in toxic replies, either as targets or instigators?

Analyzed a 'Who Replies to Whom' network, consisting of 3,334 accounts and 1,123 edges representing potentially toxic replies

RESULTS

RQ1: Thematic Narratives of Toxic Tweets Concerning Ukrainian Refugees



1. Appealing to Fear

Ukrainian refugees are untrustworthy and dangerous



2. Appealing to Fairness

Criticizing preferential treatment of Ukrainian refugees



3. Appealing to Stereotypes and Xenophobia

Accusing Ukrainian refugees of being racist or ungrateful

RESULTS

RQ1: Thematic Narratives of Toxic Tweets Concerning Ukrainian Refugees



1. Appealing to Fear

- Claimed that Ukrainian refugees are dangerous and are criminals

Translation: "Ukraine refugee kills sleeping man with ax and rapes woman"

PAPA G.M.B.H. [@papa_gmbh](#) · Follow

Ukraine-Flüchtling erschlägt schlafenden Mann mit Axt und vergewaltigt Frau
m.bild.de/regional/ruhrg... via [@staatsversagen](#)

m.bild.de
Kalletal/Detmold: Axt-Killer Elchin A. (36) hat schon einmal getötet
Vier Monate nach dem Axt-Mord von Kalletal hat die Staatsanwaltschaft Detmold Anklage gegen Elchin A. (36) erhoben.

1:48 PM · Oct 21, 2022

15 · Reply · Share

[Read 1 reply](#)

RESULTS

RQ1: Thematic Narratives of Toxic Tweets Concerning Ukrainian Refugees



1. Appealing to Fear

- Claimed that Ukrainian refugees are deceitful and are abusing the system
- Questioned the legitimacy of their status

UK Government

Could you open your home to people who have fled the war in Ukraine?

apply-to-offer-homes-for-ukraine.service.gov.uk
Homes for Ukraine

@ [redacted] · Follow

Hmm. A friend took in a refugee from the Ukraine, yet she goes back home once a month to visit family .

6:30 AM · Mar 26, 2023

62 Reply Share

Read 4 replies

RESULTS

RQ1: Thematic Narratives of Toxic Tweets Concerning Ukrainian Refugees




2. Appealing to Fairness

- Criticized the amount of money spent on Ukrainian refugees
- Argued that accepting Ukrainian refugees strains public services

Translation: "Taking the train next to a bunch of refugees from Ukraine is being one of the most fucked up experiences in Germany. Even more so with the contrast between the attendant releasing them from the fine for traveling without a ticket (because they didn't have one and didn't know how it works) ..."



 [Follow](#)

Pegar o trem ao lado de um monte de refugiado da Ucrânia tá sendo uma das experiências mais fodas da Alemanha. Ainda mais com o contraste do atendente liberando eles da multa por viajar sem ticket (porque não tinham e não sabiam como funciona) e um velho alemão emburrado do lado.

4:40 AM · Apr 22, 2022

[Read the full conversation on Twitter](#)

4 [Reply](#) [Share](#)

[Read 1 reply](#)

RESULTS

RQ1: Thematic Narratives of Toxic Tweets Concerning Ukrainian Refugees



2. Appealing to Fairness

- Ukrainian refugees received preferential treatment

Translation: "Yes, such a white refugee from the Ukraine is something fine. But Syrians and Afghans are bah."

Jun 5, 2022
Follow
Replying to @_sachslehner
Hier braucht es einen effektiven Außengrenzschutz. Ukrainer sollen weiter uneingeschränkt Hilfe und Aufnahme in der EU erhalten. Gleichzeitig muss jedoch illegale Migration mit Nachdruck unterbunden werden. An den EU-Außengrenzen sind lückenlose Kontrollen notwendig.

Jul 19, 2022
3:09 PM · Jul 19, 2022
Ja, so ein weißer Flüchtling aus der Ukraine ist schon was feines. Aber Syrer und Afghanen sind bäh. 🤔 🤔

Reply Share
Read more on Twitter

RESULTS

RQ1: Thematic Narratives of Toxic Tweets Concerning Ukrainian Refugees



3. Stereotyping and Xenophobia

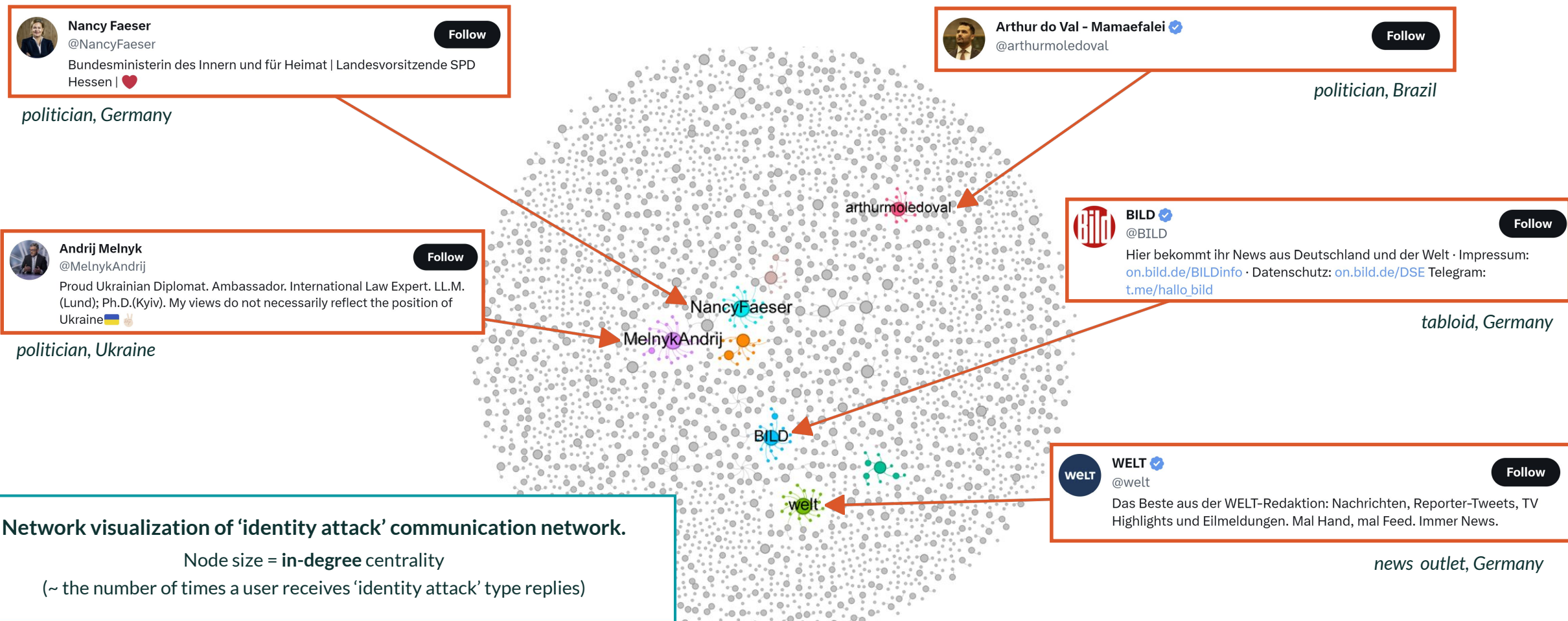
- Accused Ukrainian refugees of being racist or ungrateful



RESULTS

RQ2: What types of users are involved in toxic replies, either as targets or instigators?

Top 5 Targets of Toxic Replies



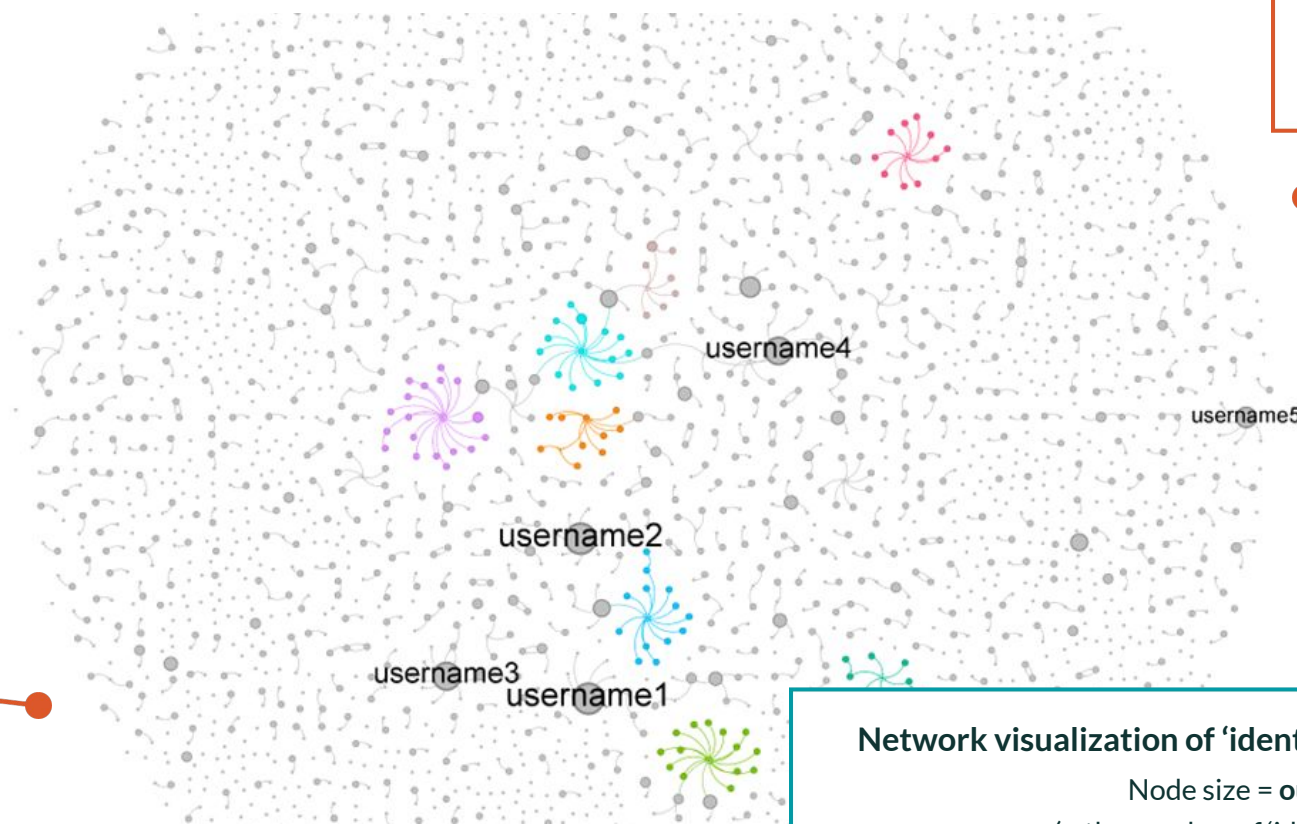
RESULTS

RQ2: What types of users are involved in toxic replies, either as targets or instigators?

Top 5 Instigator of Toxic Replies

Accounts often repost same tweet multiple times to reach wider audience, targeting different accounts, orgs, or influencers.

Accounts often express their political opinions, criticize Western governments' refugee aid, question the stereotypical view of refugees as either 'good' or 'bad', and debate the effect of having a large influx of refugees.



Accounts typically had a smaller number of followers

Network visualization of 'identity attack' communication network.

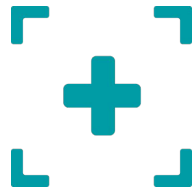
Node size = **out-degree** centrality
(~ the number of 'identity attack' type replies)

Conclusions



Identified negative narratives about Ukrainian refugees

Including accusations of fraud, criminal behavior, and undeserved financial support



Primary targets of 'identity attack' tweets

Public figures, politicians, journalists, and media organizations



Not all users with 'identity attack' language expressed anti-immigrant/anti-refugee views

Some accounts were countering racist and sexist remarks by public figures

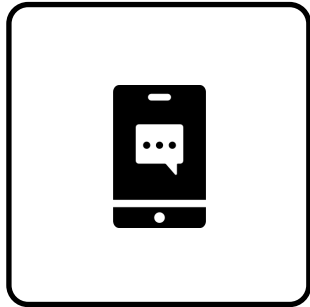


Many accounts from Germany

Warrants further examination

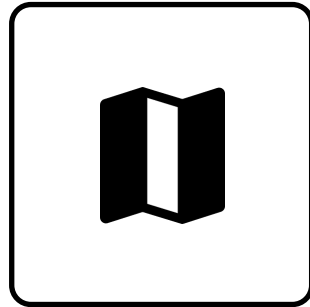
This study stresses the need for a nuanced approach to detecting toxic tweets, taking into account both the posters and intended targets.

Study Limitations and Future Work



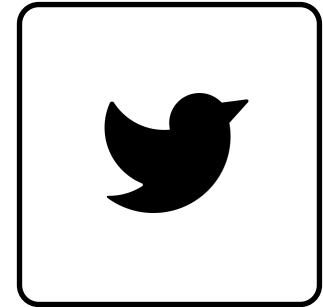
Text-based Analysis Only

Future work: Analyze visual content (in addition to textual content) to detect toxic interactions



Language Restrictions

Future work: Analyze posts in additional languages such as Polish and Turkish



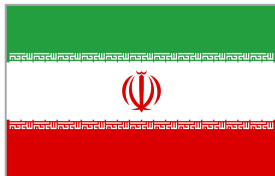
Twitter Only

Future work: Analyze other social media platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, Telegram, TikTok

Closing Thoughts:

The West's immigration policies and schisms will be exploited

In an era of inflationary pressures and budgetary constraints, immigration issues may be exploited by Canada's adversaries.



Example of an Anti-Immigration Foreign Information Operation

The screenshot shows the top portion of a Rolling Stone article. The header includes the Rolling Stone logo, a search icon, and the text "POLITICS | Pro-China Internet Trolls Just Got Busted for Doing Something Wild". The main headline is "Pro-China Internet Trolls Just Got Busted for Doing Something Wild". Below the headline is a sub-headline: "The New Europe Observation looked just like another far-right online-media outlet. But something more sinister was at work". The author is listed as "BY ADAM RAWNSLEY" and the date is "MAY 3, 2023".

Last week, Meta exposed a Chinese troll operation that had set up a fake company in London and was looking to hire anti-Soros protestors to stir up anti-immigrant sentiments in the West both online and offline.