

TRACKING CHINA'S EFFORTS TO SHAPE THE GLOBAL MEDIA ECOSYSTEM

Foreign influence operations intended to spread disinformation, sow discord and undermine confidence in democratic institutions and values are by no means a new phenomenon. That said, a confluence of factors has injected a new sense of urgency in understanding, and taking steps to combat, these operations. While the spread of falsehoods on social media and the use of false accounts and bots to amplify lies and hate speech command significant attention these days, these tactics represent only one segment of the threat.

In the pantheon of malign actors, Russia dominates the league tables. Disinformation around the Ukraine war is only the latest manifestation of an ongoing assault that largely exploits social media (*see* my prior briefing note, available [here](#).) There is, however, another significant dimension to the threat, and that is the media influence campaign being undertaken by Chinese state actors. I examine this phenomenon below.

Chinese Media Influence Operations

The Chinese government is expanding its campaigns to influence news outlets and consumers of news beyond its borders. What began in the aftermath of the 1989 crackdown on democracy as an effort targeting Chinese-speaking communities, has ballooned into an aggressive and nuanced campaign reportedly funded by billions of dollars to shape media content and public narratives across the globe, in multiple languages and focused on both traditional/legacy and digital media. Historically, the focus of the Chinese government has been on domestic control of information (it ranks 173 out of 179 on the Reporters without Borders (RSF) [ranking](#) on press freedom); now the focus is global and goes far beyond simply extolling the virtues of China.

In 2016, Xi Jinping set out, “Wherever the readers are, wherever the viewers are, that is where propaganda reports must extend their tenacles, and that is where we find the focal point and end point of propaganda and ideology work.”¹ Sarah Cook, in her 2021 [report](#) published by the National Endowment for Democracy entitled “China’s Global Media Footprint: Democratic Responses to Expanding Authoritarian Influence,” posits that “[n]o country is immune; the targets include poor and institutionally fragile states as well as wealthy democratic powers.” These efforts to “manipulate foreign information environments have grown such that hundreds of millions of news consumers around the world routinely view, read, or listen to information created or influenced by the [Chinese Communist Party

¹ See [Special Report 2020](#) issued by Freedom House entitled Beijing’s Global Megaphone and a [post](#) published by the China Media Project and written by David Bandurski (“How Xi Jinping Views the News”). The 2020 special report leads off with the following examples of how Chinese state media influence is expanding beyond China’s borders in the form of censorship, propaganda and control over content-delivery to reach audiences around the globe: “A widely used digital television service in Kenya includes Chinese state television in its most affordable package while omitting international news outlets. Portuguese television launches a prime-time “China Hour” featuring content from Chinese state media. Chinese diplomats intimidate a cable executive in Washington, D.C. to keep New Tang Dynasty Television (NTDTV), a station founded by Chinese Americans who practice Falun Gong, off the air. And a partly Chinese-owned South African newspaper abruptly ends a writer’s column after he discusses repression in China’s Xinjiang region.”

(CCP)], often without knowing its origins. ... [They] go far beyond simply ‘telling China’s story’.”

Chinese state media influence operations are by no means limited to public diplomacy. They also include covert, coercive and potentially corrupt means. So, concludes a report issued last week by Freedom House, entitled [Beijing's Global Media Influence](#), which examined media influence by the Chinese government and its proxies across 30 countries. Resistance by Western governments and civil society appears to have emboldened the Chinese government to resort to more sophisticated tactics, which incidentally make them harder to detect.

The 2022 Freedom House report notes that the effort has multiple goals: promoting self-censorship on topics that run counter to CCP interests, enlisting media and governments to assist in spreading narratives favored by the CCP and suppressing coverage deemed critical by the CCP. Where necessary, economic pressure can be brought to bear to suppress unfavorable coverage. In addition to narratives showcasing China’s economic and technological accomplishments, and other positive messaging, there is an increasing level of disinformation.² There are also efforts to deny human rights abuses against ethnic and religious minority groups in Xinjiang and to spread anti-America or anti-Western messaging to counter local concerns about China-state linked activities. The efforts seek to conceal the source of messaging, with proxies targeting critical points in the media infrastructure, undermining faith in local elections and inflaming social tensions.

The 2022 Freedom House report cites an array of tactics, ranging from propaganda, to disinformation campaigns, censorship and intimidation, control over content distribution (including social media and news aggregators, digital television, mobile devices and other

² Chinese-state sponsored disinformation should not be confused with The Epoch Times, which is staunchly *anti*-CCP. Experts on disinformation have tied The Epoch Times to the dissemination of anti-democratic falsehoods and conspiracy theories, particularly anti-vaccine narratives during the pandemic. This international media company (which, together with the digital video outlet New Tang Dynasty (NTD), comprises The Epoch Media Group), in turn, has been linked to Falun Gong, which opposes Chinese government repression of its religious movement. (The Epoch Times denies a direct link to Falun Gong.) According to a March 2022 article posted by [open Democracy](#), The Epoch Times now publishes in 33 countries and 21 languages, and has become a key media sources for pandemic-sceptic and anti-vaccine movements in France, Spain and Italy. (See also [report](#) published by IJ4EU – Investigative Journalism for Europe.)

The Epoch Times appears to have launched itself in the far right ecosystem with anti-immigrant coverage in Germany during the refugee crisis in 2015 of the anti-migrant group Pegida and politicians from Alternative for Germany (AfD). (See [report](#) published by the Institute for Strategic Dialogue on malign influences on the 2017 German elections.)

Starting in 2016, The Epoch Times made two bets: Donald Trump and Facebook, which catapulted the group into the upper echelons of the right-wing media. (See Kevin Roose, [writing](#) in the New York Times (October 2020).) The Epoch Times, according to an [NBC report](#) (August 2019), spent more than \$1.5 million on about 11,000 pro-Trump ads in the first six months of 2019 on Facebook, more than any organization outside the Trump campaign itself. According to NBC (citing data from Tubular), at the height of its ad spending in April 2019, the group’s approximately 3 billion views on Facebook, Twitter and YouTube ranked 11th among all video creators across platforms and outranked every other traditional news publisher.

telecommunications infrastructure), media training and influence over media serving the Chinese diaspora. At the center of efforts to reach large local audiences is the content-sharing agreement with mainstream media, with Chinese-state produced content injected in print, television, radio and online channels, often without attribution of the source.

Freedom House's influence scorecard lists the United Kingdom and the United States as the second and third highest, after Taiwan. The top four measured by resilience are Taiwan, the United States, Australia and the United Kingdom. Combining these yields a vulnerability score, which includes among the more vulnerable Spain, Italy, Nigeria, Kenya, Argentina and Peru. The ability of democracies to successfully counter Chinese state media influence is woefully mixed. Only half of the 30 countries examined are rated resilient, with the other half deemed vulnerable.

By way of example: a [report](#) issued by the OSCE Academy in Bishkek examined the spread of information influence in Kyrgyzstan through investment in its underfunded media sector, citing familiar tactics: injection of free content and advertising supplements in local media on the basis of cooperation agreements, establishment of local presence of Chinese media and engagement on social media and with influencers. The Chinese Embassy arranges free reporting trips for reporters, training for journalists (in effect exchange programs³) and funding for media organizations. The strategies aim to promote norms, values and narratives approved by China ("thoughtwork") and suppress or drown out information deemed inconvenient.

A 2021 [survey](#) ("The COVID-19 Story: Unmasking China's Global Strategy") by the International Federation of Journalists ("IFJ") similarly found the widespread use of training programs and sponsored trips for foreign journalists, content-sharing arrangements feeding state-sponsored narratives into the global news ecosystem, MoUs with journalism unions and increasing ownership of publishing platforms. The survey found that China is providing domestic and international content tailored for each country in non-Anglophone languages. A concurrent tactic of forcing Western journalists out of China (via expulsions or frozen approvals of visa applications) creates a vacuum that is filled by state-approved content. The survey found that countries tend to underestimate the impact of these efforts on their media systems. This was particularly true of pandemic-related reporting on China's handling of the pandemic. Deputy General Secretary of the IFJ, Jeremy Dear, is [quoted](#) as saying that "We knew this was happening. But we were surprised by the number of companies impacted and the economic investment China was making... ."

These efforts are not confined to the Global South. An [article](#) published by the Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism at Oxford University ("How China uses the news media as a weapon in its propaganda war against the West") tracks efforts in various countries in Europe. In March 2019, when Italy officially became a part of the Belt and Road Initiative,

³ See [The China Story: Reshaping the World's Media](#), an IFJ Research Report (2020), which examines journalism exchanges and training programs sponsored by Chinese journalism unions or entities that bring foreign journalists to China. The research report concludes that by cultivating third-party supporters through these exchanges and programs, China is able to outsource the influence operations it inspires to journalists outside of China. These efforts are then supplemented with MoUs and aid in the form of technical support, equipment and investment.

President Xi Jinping signed a series of media agreements with Italian media entities. Italian state-run news agency ANSA signed an MoU with China's state news agency Xinhua to launch the Xinhua Italian Service together. RAI reached agreements with China Media Group (CMG), of which China National Television (CCTV) and China Radio International (CRI) are a part. Similar relationships were created in Serbia and the Czech Republic as well.

Daniel Shats and Peter W. Singer, [writing](#) in Defense One (May 2022), note that in addition to direct broadcasting and publishing of state media content in target countries, airing content through partnerships and content-sharing arrangements, and building relationships with journalists in target countries through media exchange programs and training programs (at times under the auspices of the Belt and Road Initiative), China also benefits from the activities of Chinese firms in shaping media environments and acquisitions by Chinese companies of foreign media assets. Sarah Cook [refers](#) to these latter efforts as tactics to gain influence over “key nodes” in the flow of information.

The Russian angle

Maria Repnikova, of Georgia State University, and Bret Schafer, of the Alliance for Securing Democracy, speaking at a [State Department Briefing](#), illuminated interesting elements of the Russia-China disinformation campaign in the context of the war in Ukraine. They report an increase in alignment of narratives – a two-way street of amplification where Chinese officials adopt Russia's preferred narratives and language about the war (and, in some, cases amplify outright conspiracy theories), and Russian official increase their engagement with Chinese officials online, in both cases via retweets. As Western platforms constrain the flow of Russian-sourced disinformation, China has been able to provide a key conduit for Russian disinformation to reach audiences in the West, particularly in Europe, through state media pages (which have over a billion followers on Facebook alone) and Chinese state media giving to RT and Sputnik contributors air-time on Chinese state media.

One interesting takeaway is that the Chinese media influence operations cited above apply to Russia as well. Since 2015, Chinese and Russian state media have put in place content-sharing arrangements as well as cross-training of journalists.

From the US perspective

In the United States, according to the 2022 Freedom House report, disinformation campaigns, use of paid social media influencers, cyberattacks on news outlets and cyberbullying of journalists are occurring with greater frequency as Chinese state media outlets struggle to gain a mainstream audience. Chinese state media content reaches audiences through offline and online inserts in national and regional news publications, and the clarity and frequency of labelling is inconsistent. Social media apps owned by China-based companies with track records of censorship and surveillance within China, notably WeChat and TikTok, have gained a large American following.⁴

⁴ According to sources cited by the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace in an April 2022 [report](#) (“Limiting Chinese Influence Operations”), WeChat censors topics such as the massacre at Tiananmen Square and Falun Gong, while TikTok acknowledged doing the same, but claims to have stopped in 2019. That said, as the CEIP report notes, US-based platforms already provide fertile ground for spreading and amplifying disinformation.

China is deploying a combination of overt and covert efforts to shape political narratives in target countries, often but not exclusively on China-related themes. In [remarks](#) delivered in the summer of 2020, FBI Director Christopher Wray singled out among various examples of malign foreign influence use of academics and journalists who self-censor if they wish to travel to China, as well as pressure on US media and sports organizations to ignore or suppress criticism of China’s ambitions over Taiwan and Hong Kong.

Countering the efforts

The 2022 Freedom House report acknowledges that the complex nature of media influence efforts requires “a nuanced and multifaceted” response to limit the covert, coercive and corrupting tactics. Resilience demands a coordinated response from media outlets, governments, the social media platforms and civil society. Sarah Cook similarly [notes](#) that the CCP takes a whole-of-society approach to authoritarian control and, therefore, a whole-of-society response – as appropriate in a democratic society – is necessary. She also cautions that while countering foreign influence in the information ecosystem generally is important, China is by far the largest and most-resourced in this space, and its tactics and channels are unique to it. Combatting these efforts requires focused awareness-raising initiatives.

The recommended responses (combining Freedom House and Sarah Cook) include:

Media

- Clearly labelling Chinese content
- Improving awareness of journalistic and political consequences of accepting Chinese or proxy investments
- Revisiting content-sharing arrangements, contracts for paid advertorials and other arrangements with Chinese state media organizations
- Providing resources for investigative reporting

Governments

- Ensuring strong protections against defamation lawsuits (by adopting anti-SLAPP legislation/regulations to protect journalists, academics and civil society activists from frivolous defamation suits intended to silence critics)
- Working with civil society to expand safeguards
- Ending domestic attacks on independent media and civil society
- Ensuring fair enforcement of laws governing media ownership and acquisitions
- Building safeguards against content manipulation and surveillance via technology produced by companies with CCP ties
- Increasing Chinese-language capacity in government agencies that deal with foreign media influence
- Enhancing coordination of government agencies (particularly apt for the United States)

Platforms

- Investing in resources to counter online disinformation
- Ensuring fair and transparent content moderation

- Strengthening independent expertise on China, through funding, training and networking opportunities
- Labelling Chinese-state affiliated accounts consistently
- Removing China-linked disinformation and harassment campaigns

Civil Society

- Making resources available to monitor and expose CCP media influence activities, including identification of new disinformation tactics, security audits of apps and other technology, and mapping of media ownership structures
- Using strategic advocacy to educate policymakers and build coalitions
- Strengthening, in conjunction with government, media and digital literacy programs
- Supporting investigative journalism and Chinese-language study
- Increasing information-sharing and coordination among civil society groups, NGOs, technology firms, scholars and researchers

Concluding Thoughts

Relative to Russian disinformation, China's media influence operations are more complex, more sophisticated, more nuanced and more difficult to combat.

China, [as the IFJ notes](#), is using a multimodal strategy to redraw the information landscape to benefit its own global image. China took a more assertive and interventionist approach in the context of the pandemic, in particular conducting disinformation and misinformation campaigns across social media platforms. This complements a more assertive use of content delivery, tailoring state-designed narratives, including disinformation, for specific countries, translated into local languages. Seeking to co-opt journalists, academics, influencers and even think tanks adds a new dimension to the information war landscape. As noted [above](#), news consumers around the world are routinely exposed to information created or influenced by the CCP, often without knowing its origins.

One challenge in addressing Chinese media influence operations is the overlay of economics. In many target countries, these operations form part of a broader investment strategy focused on infrastructure development, and media often is woefully underfunded. Chinese state actors are able to embed themselves in the local media ecosystem by in effect co-opting local media players, through the provision of paid content and the like. They also focus on co-opting local thought-leaders, ranging from academics to journalists, politicians and influencers. Applying the playbook that has been shaped significantly by Russian election interference and, more recently, Russian disinformation over Ukraine is of little use; combatting Chinese efforts is far more complicated than content moderation and shutting down fake social media accounts.

While there may be scepticism as to how effective Chinese media efforts have been in the West, the impact on the Global South should be cause for greater concern. At a time of elevated geopolitical tensions, expanded Chinese-state media influence has the potential to further tip the strategic balance in its favor. The 35 abstentions on the UN General Assembly resolution condemning Russia over its invasion of Ukraine highlights the importance of the West playing a more assertive role in communicating its own messaging in the Global South, where the battle over competing narratives clearly needs to be joined. The challenge is that

there is a pre-existing scepticism towards the West in many of these countries, which explains why anti-West/anti-democratic disinformation campaigns can be more effective.

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