

Telling China's Story: The Chinese Communist Party's Campaign to Shape Global Narratives

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1. INTRODUCTION

Well-resourced countries have demonstrated sophisticated abilities to carry out influence operations in both traditional and social media ecosystems simultaneously. Russia, China, Iran, and a swath of other nation-states control media properties with significant audiences, often with reach far beyond their borders. They have also been implicated in social media company takedowns of accounts and pages that are manipulative either by virtue of the fake accounts and suspicious domains involved, or by way of coordinated distribution tactics to drive attention to certain content or to create the perception that a particular narrative is extremely popular. This raises an important question: how do state actors with full-spectrum propaganda capabilities put them to use in modern-day information operations?

While some of the technologies involved in today's information campaigns are new, the strategic thinking and ambitions behind them are well established. This is particularly true in China, where the Chinese Communist Party (CCP)¹ has long prioritized disinformation to advance its domestic monopoly on power, claims to global leadership, and irredentist aspirations. It has built a sprawling infrastructure for manipulating information and disseminating its preferred narratives both at home and abroad through instruments such as print and broadcast media, people-to-people exchanges, and networks of groomed surrogates. Today's emergent technologies are enhancing those longstanding capabilities, enabling greater velocity and virality, and offering access to new audiences and ways of spreading information.

This spectrum of capabilities, and the expansion of influence activity beyond its borders, has begun to invite comparisons to Russia. For instance, both use hybrid strategies that leverage social media accounts in concert with state media, and both have modernized the analog concept of "agents of influence" by creating fake personas on social media platforms.

Yet, significant differences remain. First, China has generally taken the high road, projecting to the world a confident, inspirational image of the country and its leader, Xi Jinping. By contrast, Russia has aimed lower, destabilizing adversaries by covertly fomenting chaos within their borders. Second, China maintains a unique, parallel information environment in which the Party-state communicates to an international audience on popular global social networks (such as Facebook, YouTube, and Twitter), while its residents participate nearly exclusively in Chinese state-approved communities (such as Weibo and WeChat). China operates surreptitiously across all of these social platforms, using paid commenters and fake accounts to spread disinformation and preferred messages in an unattributed fashion.

Third, China's online activities frequently support offline influence operations that make extensive use of in-person networks of human agents of influence, overtly attributed state media in English and other non-Chinese languages, and "grey propaganda" with less obviously attributable ties to the mainland. This robust and well-resourced collection of tools should equip China to execute integrated influence operations on a scale that Russia cannot match. And yet, we find that some of China's capabilities are deployed in surprisingly imprecise and ineffective ways.

How do state actors with full-spectrum propaganda capabilities put them to use in modern-day information operations?

In light of the preceding differences, a deeper dive to analyze China's operations on its own terms is necessary. Understanding the impact of technological innovations on China's influence operations, and how its capabilities are being deployed, is the focus of our work. This paper assesses China's media and social media landscape and seeks to answer a broader question about China's activities: what is the scope and nature of China's overt and covert capabilities, and how do those capabilities complement one another? To answer this question, we will evaluate capabilities via three case studies: The first will assess China's influence operations related to the Hong Kong protests in 2019-2020—the first time social network companies took down and publicly attributed accounts to China. The second case study will analyze China's activities during Taiwan's January 2020 election. The third case study will look at public diplomacy around the COVID-19 pandemic and China's efforts to control the narrative via both covert and overt means. In each of these cases, we will consider activities spanning both media and social media. Finally, we will apply a comparative framework to contrast China's activities with Russia's to better understand how these actors operate now, and to consider how China may continue to evolve.

2. AN ESTABLISHED PLAYBOOK

China's current initiatives in broadcast, print, and digital propaganda tap a deep reservoir of experience. Over nearly a century, the CCP has honed the art of combining overt propaganda and covert tactics, such as enlisting foreign agents of influence, to achieve more than either method could alone. For instance, in early 1952, during the Korean War, China alleged that a campaign of germ warfare waged by the United States was responsible for outbreaks of bubonic plague, anthrax, cholera, and encephalitis in parts of China and North Korea. In concert with socialist allies, Chinese propaganda outlets orchestrated a chorus of outrage around the globe. They publicized "confessions" from American POWs, liberally quoted foreign visitors to Chinese exhibits documenting the alleged war crimes, and established a base of operations in Prague from which they cultivated Western leftist and pacifist sympathizers who amplified their claims in Western media.²



Figure 1. "Everyone Must Prevent Epidemics: Smash the Germ Warfare of the American Imperialists!" (1952).³

Although the United States flatly rejected the allegations, many foreign figures were convinced. John Powell, an American journalist in China, declared that the United States "surpasses the savagery of Hitler Germany and Hirohito Japan" and "shocked and horrified the entire world."⁴ Hewlett Johnson, the Church of England's Dean of Canterbury, appealed to his archbishop and the British public to believe China.⁵ W.E.B. Du Bois; Frédéric Joliot-Curie, a Nobel Laureate in Chemistry; and the Cambridge University biochemist Joseph Needham were also among those who lent credence to China's claims.⁶

A few months later, in June 1952, the Soviet-led World Peace Council invited seven left-leaning scientists from Italy, Brazil, Sweden, France, England, and the Soviet Union to visit China as an international fact-finding commission.⁷ Needham was the only one of the seven who spoke

Chinese, and though he conducted no scientific investigation of his own, he refused to believe that China's claims could have been fabricated because of his high personal regard for the Chinese scientists who presented findings to the commission;⁸ some had once attended elite British and American universities and betrayed no hint of doubt to him.⁹ The commission's final report, which Needham organized, echoed their claims.¹⁰ China would not allow independent investigations by the World Health Organization or the International Committee of the Red Cross, arguing that both organizations were prejudiced against it.

The young Chinese government used this episode for many purposes. Domestically, the episode mobilized the Chinese public behind the CCP and eroded the residual good will toward the United States built up over years of close engagement and alliance against Japan. On a more positive note, it also touched off a series of public health and vaccination campaigns in China that saved countless lives. In a host of Western nations, it sharpened divisions between the political right and left over the nature of the CCP regime and of American power in the world. It pitted those who welcomed cooperation with a new China against those who saw it as a threat to the international order. China worked hard to exploit those cleavages in the hope of weakening Western resolve to fight the Korean War from within.

Though this episode is now a footnote in history, it was a harbinger of the "post-truth" world that we now inhabit. The preponderance of historical evidence and of scholarly opinion outside of China refutes the germ warfare allegations; nevertheless, the CCP succeeded in clouding the record so that belief in American perfidy endures in certain circles.¹¹ This disinformation campaign blended overt propaganda and the recruitment of credulous foreign authorities to amplify and legitimate CCP talking points, seed doubt and suspicion, and build up the domestic and international standing of the CCP at the expense of its adversaries.

It is a tried-and-true strategy that others have since pursued with vigor, notoriously, but by no means exclusively, in the realm of public health. In the early 1980s, for example, the Soviet Union launched Operation Denver (now more commonly known as Operation INFEKTION), a global campaign that used grey propaganda networks and agent-of-influence scientists to spread the false narrative that HIV/AIDS originated in a U.S. government lab at Fort Detrick, Maryland.¹² The conspiratorial premise spread to targeted countries over a period of months to years; as Fort Detrick had housed the U.S. bioweapons program from 1943 to 1969, there was enough of a kernel of plausibility to help the story take hold.

Fort Detrick once again became the subject of a bioweapons conspiracy in March 2020, involving COVID-19—the novel coronavirus that first emerged in Wuhan, China, and became a pandemic. As U.S. leaders asserted that the disease may have leaked from a virology research institution within Wuhan, a series of claims on Chinese social media, amplified by Chinese media, suggested that in fact the United States had engineered the virus at Fort Detrick and brought it to Wuhan.¹³ This time, the narrative battle was fought via state media, YouTube videos, and prominent politicians with Twitter accounts, and spread around the world in a matter of days.

China entered the internet age with a sophisticated propaganda model already in place and decades of experience refining the institutional, psychological, and tactical aspects of its application. The CCP has successfully integrated into that model every new wave of technology since the dawn of radio, enveloping each in a multilayered governance structure meant to discipline and coordinate its contribution to a mutually reinforcing spectrum of capabilities. That structure is unlike any in the world.

3. CHINA'S PROPAGANDA ECOSYSTEM

3.1 Organizational Structure

Two pillars of the CCP's distinctive approach to controlling information are the Central Propaganda Department (CPD) and the United Front. Both encompass an alphabet soup of offices with shifting portfolios and positions in the parallel bureaucracies of party and state, but all ultimately report to policy making and coordination bodies ("leading small groups") at the apex of the CCP's leadership.¹⁴ Though they generally operate in extreme secrecy, their basic remit is to engineer domestic and international climates favorable to the Party's goals. As CCP General Secretary Xi Jinping tightens his grip on China and positions it for global leadership, their work has taken on new urgency.

Central Propaganda Department

The CPD, China's first pillar of information control, lies at the heart of the CCP's propaganda apparatus. Established in 1924, it was patterned after the Agitation and Propaganda Department of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union. In time the CPD's tendrils penetrated every channel of mass communications in China, policing content from print publishing and broadcast media to cyberspace, the arts, and education. The CPD also presides over the ideological indoctrination of party members and supports the propaganda ("publicity" is now the CCP's favored translation) activities undertaken by ordinary government offices. Formally, it coordinates with state organs in charge of areas such as law enforcement, media licensing, and internet regulation, but in practice the boundaries between these bodies blur. Some of them represent themselves domestically as party organs and externally as state organs, and many of the relevant personnel have dual party and state identities. For instance, the State Council Information Office is the externally facing, state alter ego of the Foreign Propaganda Office of the CCP Central Committee. In June 2020, it released a government white paper that extolled China's response to the COVID-19 pandemic.¹⁵

Though they generally operate in extreme secrecy, their basic remit is to engineer domestic and international climates favorable to the Party's goals.

The United Front

The United Front, the second pillar, maintains a comparable dual identity. Managed by the CCP's United Front Work Department (UFWD), it co-opts influential figures and groups that the CCP finds useful but does not trust, such as non-party intellectuals, academics, and business people. It operates through a web of overt and clandestine activities and organizations both within and outside of China, including cultural exchanges, religious groups, professional societies, criminal gangs, chambers of commerce, peaceful unification committees, and many other ostensibly civic associations.¹⁶ Along with the People's Liberation Army and the Party, Mao listed the United Front among the three "magic weapons" that achieved the revolutionary victory that first brought him to power. During the Korean War, it managed the foreign exponents who helped to give China's germ warfare allegations global reach. Today, it orchestrates localized influence campaigns around the world.¹⁷

3.2 China's Overt Influence Capabilities

Controlling Information Domestically

In the late 1990s and early 2000s, with the advent of economic reforms and the internet, media in China enjoyed a golden era of sorts. Crusading newspapers and magazines ran investigative pieces, such as exposés on an HIV epidemic in rural China and reports on police torture that probed the darker corners of Chinese society. The rise of social media—such as Weibo and WeChat—further challenged the Party's monopoly on speech by surfacing new voices. Beginning in the mid-2000s, however, the Party conspicuously began to reassert control. It replaced editors and publishers at many of the more popular media outlets, and the CPD banned Chinese media in one province from conducting investigative journalism in another.¹⁸ As an example of the increasing harmonization of the media around Party messaging, major national newspapers have on several occasions printed nearly identical front pages.¹⁹

At the same time, internet regulators have blocked a growing list of foreign news, NGO, and social media websites, and have mandated real-name registration across a wide array of domestic online platforms, including Weibo. This has made it easier for the security services to interrogate, arrest, and prosecute Chinese netizens for expressing their political views. Regulators have also enlisted



Figure 2. Front pages of six leading Chinese newspapers, October 26, 2017.²⁰

the firms that operate China's internet infrastructure in online surveillance by conditioning their business licenses on compliance with an unending stream of censorship directives. Finally, the Party has fostered a vast infrastructure of partisan commenters known as the 50 Cent Party to amplify its views and attack independent voices online.

The 2011 Arab Spring rattled the CCP by demonstrating how threatening foreign social media and online platforms could be to the survival of authoritarian regimes. The following year, Xi Jinping came to power determined to stave off a "color revolution" in China by "waging a war to win public opinion" and "retaking the Internet battlefield."²¹ The climate for free expression has since grown ever more repressive, and alternative points of view have been silenced across PRC society. In February 2016, Xi made a high-profile tour of the country's three top state-run media outlets, announcing that editors and reporters must pledge absolute loyalty to the Party and follow its leadership in "thought, politics and action." At the headquarters of China Central Television (CCTV), he announced that "the media run by the Party and the government are the propaganda fronts and must have the Party as their last name."²² In response, state media redoubled what is euphemistically called "public opinion guidance": dissemination of content that touts the CCP's achievements, maligns its enemies, and makes its ascent appear inexorable.

In 2018, the CCP further tightened party control of the media by shifting direct oversight of print publications, film, press, and a trio of key broadcast properties from state organs to the CPD. This trio, comprising China National Radio, China Radio International, and China Central Television (CCTV), including its international arm, China Global Television Network (CGTN), was merged into a media group known as the Voice of China, a move that broke down bureaucratic walls and facilitated unified messaging across the domestic and international media spaces in a multiplicity of languages.²³ Fragmentary statistics suggest that, under Xi, the budgets allocated to propaganda organs at every level of government have swelled.²⁴ This spending now supports the most sophisticated infrastructure of media surveillance and censorship on the planet.

Projecting Influence Internationally

While the CCP carefully polices its domestic walled garden, it exploits the freer spaces outside of China's borders to project its influence on the world stage.²⁵ Since the mid-2000s, the Party has launched a campaign to grab "the right to speak" (话语权) to the rest of the world from Western media outlets and independent Chinese-language voices, which it accuses of distorting news about China.²⁶ For instance, in 2007, the Party unveiled a Grand External Propaganda Campaign (大外宣), earmarking billions in an attempt to control external narratives about China, and Xi has vastly intensified that effort, waging a global "discourse war" (话语战).²⁷ As Xi told the 2018 National Meeting on Ideology and Propaganda, "We should improve our international communication capability, tell China's stories well, disseminate China's voice, show an authentic and comprehensive China to the world, and raise the country's soft power and the influence of Chinese culture."²⁸

To achieve those missions, PRC state media has greatly expanded its overseas operations. Xinhua, China's official state news agency, is one of the largest news agencies in the world.²⁹ CGTN operates dozens of foreign bureaus and broadcasts in seven languages. China Radio International has contracts to broadcast from more than a dozen radio stations in the United States alone, while China Daily places inserts in newspapers such as the *Washington Post*, for as much as \$250,000 an issue. PRC diplomats are actively promoting China's stories through regular, and sometimes pugnacious, appearances in local media around the world, a practice described as "Wolf Warrior diplomacy" (战狼外交).³⁰

PRC state media also successfully competes against established Western wire services to supply content to local media around the world. While generally uncontroversial, this content often repeats crude propaganda and disinformation on matters closely tied to PRC national interests. For instance, in March 2020, PressTV, an Iranian network aimed at the Middle East, reprinted a *Global Times* article that linked the origins of the COVID-19 pandemic to the U.S. military.³¹ Likewise, in May 2020, the *Manila Times* carried a *Global Times* article that argued that Taiwan bought passage of supportive U.S. legislation through huge “donations” to American experts and scholars.³² State media has also expanded its foreign influence through social media channels, as detailed later in this paper.

The global Chinese diaspora is a major, but often overlooked, audience for China’s propaganda. Thirty years ago, Chinese-language media outside of China reflected a diverse range of political perspectives. Today, after significant investment from China and pro-CCP interests, Chinese-language publications that echo and amplify CCP narratives dominate. Chinese state actors are believed to have directly established some of these outlets, such as the U.S.-based media group that owns the television station SinoVision and the newspaper *Qiao Bao*. This media group was

founded by reporters and editors from China who immigrated to the United States in the 1990s. Originally set up after the 1989 crackdown on pro-democracy protests in Tiananmen Square to burnish China’s standing in the Chinese diaspora, it maintains close ties with state-owned media and entertainment organizations on the mainland.³³

Xi Jinping has energized the UFWD’s operations, reportedly adding 40,000 officials to its roster and elevating it to the top tier of party organs.

In parallel with the state media’s international inroads, the United Front has been vital to China’s soft power offensive.³⁴ Broadly speaking, all party members are obliged to promote the United Front’s mission, but those serving in commercial, cultural, educational, and professional organizations, along with other forms of “people-to-people” exchange, are at its forefront. The United Front cultivates pro-Beijing perspectives in the Chinese diaspora and the wider world by rewarding those it deems friendly with accolades and lucrative opportunities, while orchestrating social and economic pressure against critics. This pressure is often intense

but indirect, and clear attribution is therefore difficult. But it has had a devastating effect on Chinese-language media in the diaspora.³⁵ Only a handful of independent voices remain in North America, Australia, and Europe, though Southeast Asia’s landscape is more diverse.

Meanwhile, China’s government has brought hundreds of journalists from developing countries to China for training courses that showcase the economic and technological achievements of China’s governance model. The Chinese government typically pays their expenses, offers stipends, and provides generous accommodations and sightseeing opportunities, which return dividends in goodwill and favorable coverage when the journalists return home.³⁶

Xi Jinping has energized the UFWD’s operations, reportedly adding 40,000 officials to its roster and elevating it to the top tier of party organs.³⁷ Able to tap the party-state’s vast resources, it realigns interests and incentivizes cooperation with the CCP so that influential non-party figures naturally take up and amplify the Party’s talking points as if these were their own. Ideally, foreign partners have no idea that they are targets of United Front operations, making the enterprise particularly

THE UNITED FRONT: DENIABILITY BY DESIGN

The case of Anna Lindstedt illustrates with unusual clarity how the CCP combines clandestine United Front work with overt propaganda to try to dominate an information space. Lindstedt was Sweden’s ambassador to China in January 2019 when she brokered a series of secret meetings in Stockholm between a pair of businessmen and Angela Gui. Ms. Gui’s father, Gui Minhai, was a Hong Kong-based author with Swedish citizenship who published and sold books critical of the CCP. In 2015, he was abducted from Thailand and resurfaced in police custody in China, where he was convicted in early 2020 of “providing intelligence overseas.” Ms. Gui has publicly championed her father’s case, helping to make it an international cause célèbre, especially in Hong Kong, where it signaled an alarming intensification of the CCP’s grip on the city, and in Sweden, where it sparked a downward spiral in relations with China.³⁸

In an effort to silence the controversy, China turned to local agents of influence. International media have reported extensively on the Stockholm meetings and the backgrounds of the two businessmen who initiated them after cultivating relationships with Lindstedt.³⁹ Neither businessman can be tied publicly to the Chinese state; instead their association bears all of the hallmarks of a United Front operation. One, a PRC national known as Kevin Liu, has close ties with the Chinese embassy in Sweden and worked as a fixer between high-ranking officials, businesspeople, and academics from the two countries. He evaded a ban on entry into the EU by entering Sweden on a visa and passport issued under a different name, a subterfuge that suggests the connivance of PRC authorities. In fact, he has assumed several names over the years, and his true identity remains unclear, even to many of the Swedes he worked with.⁴⁰ The other businessman, a Sri Lankan-born resident of Finland named John Meewella, prospered as Liu’s business partner in several Hong Kong- and PRC-registered ventures and has received awards from various levels of the Chinese government, including the nation’s highest award for foreign experts, the Friendship Award.⁴¹

Over three days in Stockholm, during which Liu, Meewella, and Lindstedt also met with China’s ambassador to Sweden, the conversations with Ms. Gui progressed from flattery and reassurance to overt pressure. Meewella implied that her father’s fate urgently depended on her agreeing to abandon her fierce public advocacy of his

cause, and dangled before her the possibilities of employment and financial assistance. Ambassador Lindstedt reportedly urged Ms. Gui to accept the bargain. Ms. Gui refused and left feeling threatened and betrayed.⁴²

The United Front apparently compromised the judgment of an experienced Swedish diplomat; it enlisted her in an effort to silence a fellow citizen not just on the most contentious issue in their country’s relationship with China, but also on the fate of an imprisoned parent. After Ms. Gui publicized the affair, the Swedish government dismissed Lindstedt and prosecuted her for “arbitrary conduct in negotiating with a foreign power.” Lindstedt was acquitted in July 2020 in part because prosecutors could not overcome the problem of attribution intrinsic to a United Front operation; they could not in fact establish that Liu and Meewella represented a foreign power.⁴³ Liu returned to China, and Meewella has tried to scrub online evidence of his involvement. Throughout, China has mounted an intense propaganda campaign across traditional and new media to defend its handling of Gui’s case and to disavow any connection to the Lindstedt affair. This campaign includes a staged prison confession from Gui Minhai himself, threats, personal accusations, and “public criticism of Swedish media outlets, journalists, scholars, human rights activists, political parties and authorities,” with China’s outspoken ambassador to Sweden playing a starring role.⁴⁴

effective. One such case is that of Sweden’s former ambassador to China, Anna Lindstedt, who abetted an effort by apparent CCP surrogates to silence one of the most forceful international critics of the Party. Had it succeeded, this old-fashioned human operation would have eliminated a vital challenge to the dominance of the CCP’s modern propaganda machine (see sidebar on page 11).

Making Overt Propaganda Social

In addition to China’s influence methods in the traditional media ecosystem and on domestic digital platforms such as Weibo, Chinese state media has expanded its international influence by establishing a social media presence. Starting at least as early as 2009, the properties have leveraged a broad range of Western social media platforms, many of which are blocked in China itself (see Table 1).⁴⁵ On Facebook alone, Pages belonging to China’s English-language state media apparatus give the CCP access to, at a minimum, over 100 million followers on the platform worldwide.

Outlet	Official Presence On Platform			
	Twitter	Facebook*	Instagram	YouTube
Xinhua News	12.6M	79.9M	1.2M	894K**
CCTV	1M	49M	779K	857K**
CGTN	13.9M	105M	2.1M	1.66M**
<i>People’s Daily</i>	7.1M	84M	1M	64.3K
<i>Global Times</i>	1.7M	54M	174K**	34.5K**
<i>China Daily</i>	4.3M	93M	603K	27.9K**
China.org.cn	1.1M	32M	N/A	11K**

Table 1: Number of followers of official Chinese state media accounts on social media as of May 29, 2020.

* Facebook number represents how many people have Liked the Page.

** indicates the account has not been verified by the platform.

Since 2015, the CCP has pursued a strategy of media localization on social media, including the use of regionalized language and content.⁴⁶ This is particularly evident on Facebook: CGTN, for example, maintains CGTN America, CGTN Europe, CGTN Africa, CGTN Français, CGTN Arabic, CGTN en Español, and CGTN на русском (CGTN in Russian) as official Pages on the platform.

Much of the content appears to promote a positive view of China and its place in global politics and culture.⁴⁷ For example, English-language Chinese state media coverage has consistently taken a positive tone in its coverage of the coronavirus pandemic, sharing a significantly higher percentage of positive narratives —such as stories of recovered coronavirus patients—than U.S. mainstream and government-funded media on this topic.⁴⁸

Chinese state media uses paid ads to push content from these Pages into the social media feeds of people across the globe.⁴⁹ Facebook’s Ads Library shows regional ad targeting of the English-language content to a wide range of countries including India (Punjab State), Nepal, Bangladesh

(Dhaka), and the Philippines (Manila), suggesting that English is used to communicate state views to a broad global audience.

Chinese state media outlets are not the only official Chinese channels spreading Beijing's narrative on social media: several Chinese diplomats and embassies have created active presences on Twitter since early 2019.⁵⁰ Some of these accounts have hundreds of thousands of followers, such as Foreign Ministry of Information Department Director Hua Chunying, with 575,300 as of July 2020;⁵¹ Zhao Lijian, a spokesperson at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs renowned for his combative commentary on the United States, has more than three quarters of a million followers. Numerous Chinese editors and reporters are also active on Twitter. For instance, Hu Xijin, the editor of *Global Times*, has 404,100 followers and tweets regularly.

3.3 China's Covert Influence Capabilities

China's extensive overt propaganda capabilities, on print, broadcast, and social media, are used to influence audiences both domestically and worldwide to embrace China's point of view and policy positions. Although those messages may involve persuasion, spin, and factually dubious claims at times, they can be directly tied to their state-actor source. However, as with many states, China additionally has less-attributable or unattributable communication options that it can draw on to influence opinions more surreptitiously. These include content farms, subversive commenter brigades, fake social media accounts and personas, and misleading actors on social media channels.

Content Farms

One facet of China's present-day means of influence is content farms (sometimes called content mills): websites that mass-produce clickbait articles designed to generate traffic and ad revenue.⁵² They may be multinational operations made up of many individuals who earn substantial amounts of money by either creating or sharing the articles, often plagiarizing content from other sources. To facilitate distribution, some drive traffic to their site through search engine optimization (SEO) techniques; others share content to social networks or post their links on popular messaging platforms.⁵³ The opaque nature of the funding, ownership, distribution, and relationship to the state makes content farms a modern digital variant of the grey propaganda media properties of decades past.

Content farms are a global phenomenon, but those with content related to the PRC are most often based in China, Malaysia, and Taiwan. Audiences vary: some generate content aimed at the Chinese diaspora living outside the mainland, while others target audiences of strategic interest, such as those in Taiwan. According to an April 2020 report from Recorded Future's Insikt Group, there have not yet been observed cases of state-linked English-language content farms targeting Western audiences.⁵⁴

The Reporter, a Taiwanese non-profit media organization, undertook an extensive investigation into the dynamics of the farms, tracing them from their posts on LINE, a Japanese mobile messaging app popular in Taiwan, back to their owners.⁵⁵ Some of the owners have personal pro-China political leanings, which is reflected in the content on their sites. In an interview with The Reporter, Evan Lee, a businessman who runs multiple content farms, described the websites

The opaque nature of the funding, ownership, distribution, and relationship to the state makes content farms a modern digital variant of the grey propaganda media properties of decades past.

as having two potential motivations.⁵⁶ Farms with financial motivations generally produce “trivial articles” that focus on topics from health to fashion to history. Others, Lee says, have “an agenda,” and are motivated by political or social interests rather than money; some of these farms occasionally feature disinformation and conspiracy content.⁵⁷

Content farms with a covert political agenda promote pro-China stories while also amplifying or initiating denigrating rumors about political opponents, such as Taiwan’s government under President Tsai Ing-wen. Some of the political content farm material appears to be plagiarized from Chinese outlets: Taiwanese fact-checking website MyGoPen has reported finding simplified characters, phrases used only in China, or official statements from the Chinese government in the suspicious articles users saw on LINE and flagged for fact-checks.⁵⁸ The Insikt Group’s report also finds that this amplification relationship has worked in the opposite direction. In 2018 a false story about banana exports was framed as an example of the DPP’s responsibility for Taiwan’s deteriorating relationship with China; it was created by the content farm 密訊 “Mission,” which, according to its Whols records, is registered in Taiwan.⁵⁹ It was picked up by China-friendly media outlets in Taiwan, such as *China Times* and *United Daily News*, and then by Beijing’s state-run press agency, Xinhua News Agency.⁶⁰ The spread of stories from grey propaganda content farms to more legitimate press with a wider audience, including state media, is a modern form of narrative laundering.

Although journalists and researchers who study China have noted the presence of these grey propaganda properties and their frequently sympathetic stories about China, attribution of *specific* content farms as direct tools of the Chinese government remains a challenge; for example, The Reporter describes the domain 壹讀, or read01.com, as a Chinese content farm.⁶¹ This content farm was highlighted in their investigation because it amplified a rumor in one of its articles:⁶² “Major breaking news: Tsai Ing-wen may have an abortion for Lee Teng-hu! 1.3 billion Chinese are stunned” (translated).⁶³ Read01.com’s articles are written with traditional Chinese characters, which are used in Taiwan but not in China. However, according to its Whols record, the domain was previously registered in China, then switched to an American-based Cloudflare IP in 2016—which some operators do to mask their identity and country of origin. Nonetheless, domain registration alone is insufficient to assert that a given content farm is part of a state-sponsored influence operation.

More details about how content farms such as Mission are used in influence operations are provided in the Taiwan 2020 election case study in Section 4.2.

Surreptitious Commenters: The 50 Cent Party

Perhaps the most famous of China’s more covert influence capabilities is the digital commenter brigade known as Wumao, or “50 Cent Party.” It emerged as a presence on China’s domestically focused message boards and online spaces in 2004. The “army,” as it is sometimes called, consists of hundreds of thousands—some estimates reach as high as two million—of conscripted posters who comment on social media and news articles to bolster the CCP, its leaders, and its policies, or simply to distract real participants from controversial topics and conversations.

The scale of the operation is believed to be substantial, though exact estimates vary. In 2017, Gary King, Jennifer Pan, and Margaret Roberts undertook a comprehensive review of material from the 2014 “Xiaolan” leak of thousands of emails, in which 50 Cent Party posters submitted their online activity to the Zhanggong district Internet Propaganda Office (章贡区网宣办) to secure

compensation for their completed assignments. The researchers posited that out of an estimated 80.4 billion social media posts in China's 1,200 or more online communities in 2013, 448 million comments were likely to be from the 50 Cent Party. On the surface, these posts appear to be the comments of ordinary people.⁶⁴

King, Pan, and Roberts discovered that a majority of 50 Cent Party comments that included URL attribution appear to have been posted to government websites (GanzhouWeb, Newskj, DajiangWeb, JidanWeb, JiangxiWeb, CCTVWeb, RenminWeb, JiujiangWeb, and QiangGouWeb); over 46% were on commercial sites including Sina Weibo, Tencent Weibo, Baidu Tieba, and Tencent QZone. The researchers found no evidence of automation in the posting process, but did note bursts of activity that indicated temporal coordination of comment campaigns. They additionally noted there was a minimal amount of what the researchers called "Taunting of Foreign Countries" in the 2014 dataset of leaked emails; most activity was focused on domestic topics, rather than international influence.⁶⁵

Leaked documents additionally indicate that 50 Cent Party commenters are trained in an online "guerrilla ethnography" to help them understand their audiences.⁶⁶ In a 2017 *Washington Post* op-ed, Blake Miller, of the London School of Economics, and Mary Gallagher, of the University of Michigan, describe the Chinese government's strategies to "guide public opinion as it develops": commenters are instructed, in official manuals, to drive and shape the conversation, "diluting negative attitudes online and spreading positive energy (正能量)." ⁶⁷ Gallagher and Miller reiterate that the strategy is not always unified within the domestic social media ecosystem; sometimes the censors who delete comments unacceptable to the Party work at cross-purposes to the paid army posting them.

Although the execution appears to be haphazard at times, China's army of state-controlled internet commenters affords it the ability to introduce persuasive communications into the social media experience of Chinese "netizens," potentially creating the belief that engineered comments are the real opinions of fellow citizens just like them.

Covert Activity on Western Social Media Platforms

Although attribution is often a significant challenge, the CCP has demonstrably begun to expand its controlled-commenter-brigade strategies to Western social media.

Some of the earliest indications of persona accounts on Western platforms appeared in March 2019, when BuzzFeed reported on allegations by Reddit moderators on a series of subreddits, noting the presence of what appeared to be coordinated efforts to downvote negative commentary on China in general and Chinese company Huawei in particular, and to upvote or push pro-CCP content.⁶⁸ One moderator told BuzzFeed that "ironically, our freedom of press and an open internet is being exploited by an adversary to subvert democracy." BuzzFeed investigated thirty of the accounts, noting the difficulty of assessing the extent to which the efforts were coordinated; some of the accounts, in fact, acknowledged their connection to China by way of heritage or citizenship. Reddit ultimately did not make any formal attribution to CCP in its own investigation.

China's army of state-controlled internet commenters affords it the ability to introduce persuasive communications into the social media experience of Chinese "netizens."

Another example of suspicious behavior, this time on Facebook and LinkedIn, came to light in June 2019, when journalist Paul Huang of Foreign Policy reported on the November 2018 mayoral race in Kaohsiung, Taiwan.⁶⁹ Pro-Beijing candidate Han Kuo-yu's victory initially appeared to be due solely to the candidate's appeal as a charismatic populist who was able to generate significant digital engagement and attention on Facebook. But Huang found that Han Kuo-yu may have had outside support from a "seemingly professional cybergroup from China." In one Facebook Group supporting Han, as Huang describes, fans promoted "talking points, memes, and very often fake news attacking Han's opponent Chen Chi-mai, the Democratic Progressive Party government, and anyone who said a bad word about Han." Comment brigades also mobbed the Pages of Chen and any other leader or candidate who criticized Han. The Chen campaign claimed that the defamatory misinformation was the work of overseas accounts with mainland IP addresses. Later, it emerged that three of the original creators and administrators of the Han Facebook Page had LinkedIn profiles claiming that they were employees of Tencent. Investigation revealed a cluster of 249 additional LinkedIn profiles that used identical language to describe their purported Tencent jobs, and had several additional suspicious characteristics: uniquely cropped profile pictures (some of the same face with different names), no contacts, identical language in past job descriptions, and language patterns more indicative of non-Taiwanese residents.

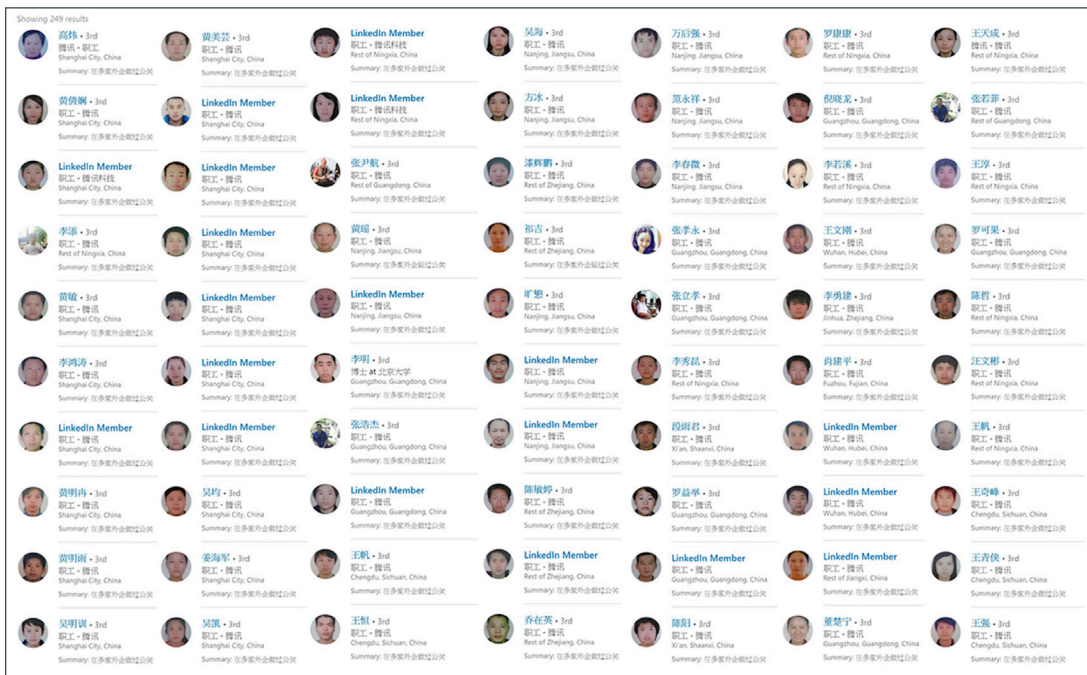


Figure 3: Accounts comprising a network of 249 strikingly similar stub profiles on LinkedIn that used the phrase "worked in public relations for many foreign companies" (在多家外企做过公关), from Foreign Policy's investigation into Taiwan 2018 midterm manipulation campaigns.⁷⁰

Throughout the 2018 Taiwan election, President Tsai Ing-wen attempted to alert the Taiwanese public to the alleged interference from China, describing a two-pronged influence strategy: first, spreading fabrications and fake news stories, and second, flooding the social media ecosystem and targeting any opposition with smears and attacks. The response from China's Taiwan Affairs Office, as reported in the *New York Times*, was to describe Ms. Tsai's claims as "fake news" and "not even worth refuting."⁷¹

Similarly to the Reddit comment activity, the suspicious accounts that were active during the November 2018 Taiwan midterms were never concretely attributed to the CCP. One challenge for assessing Chinese commenter activity on Western social networks has been that the definition of “state-sponsored” is not always well-defined when it comes to China. There are a range of instances in which hyperpatriotic “netizens,” declaring their loyalty to or pride in China, have leapt over the firewall to comment on hot-button issues. Many of these commenters aggressively promote the CCP point of view in their contributions, yet it often appears to be motivated by sincere patriotism. Connecting the accounts back to direct state tasking and coordination is a significant challenge—however, in August 2019 several clusters of fake accounts and content related to influence operations in Hong Kong and targeting dissidents *were* concretely attributed to the CCP by several Western tech companies including Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube. We examine these instances of concrete attribution in detail in the case studies below.



4. FULL-SPECTRUM INFORMATION OPERATIONS: THREE CASE STUDIES EXPLORING CHINA'S CAPABILITIES

To better understand how China deploys the extensive set of overt and covert capabilities catalogued above, we now examine the specific tactics used in information operations across three case studies: the Hong Kong protests that began in June 2019, the Taiwan presidential election of 2020, and the emergence of the novel coronavirus in Wuhan in late 2019. While much of the recent attention to state actor influence capabilities has focused on social media manipulation, such as fake Facebook Pages and Twitter accounts, we additionally examine the usage and importance of traditional narrative propaganda, and coordination between media and social media, to achieve full-spectrum operations.

We find that China's overt state media produces news stories that reiterate the CCP point of view, and pays to promote this content to international audiences; that suspicious video channels and murky sites produce highly aligned messaging but are a significant challenge to attribute; and that demonstrably fake social media accounts are used to cheerlead for state talking points, making them seem like organic, popular grassroots points of view. These case studies offer a look at how China uses its robust modern propaganda infrastructure in service to its longtime core objective of "telling China's story well"—especially for international audiences.⁷²

4.1 The 2019 Hong Kong Protests: The World's First Look at China's Twitter Trolls

Background

On June 9, 2019, more than a million people in Hong Kong took to the streets to protest a Chinese extradition bill that would have allowed the Hong Kong government to extradite individuals wanted by jurisdictions with which it doesn't formally have an extradition treaty, such as China, Taiwan, and Macau.⁷³ Critics of the proposed law worried it would put Hong Kong residents, especially activists, human rights lawyers and journalists, at risk of arbitrary detention, unfair trials, and torture.⁷⁴ Many protestors felt the bill was one more affront in the PRC's ongoing attempts to slowly repress Hong Kong's civil liberties. The protests started as peaceful marches, but as the protestors continued to take to the streets, the gatherings began to include clashes with the police. In the first few months of continual demonstrations, a number of events attracted significant global public attention: On July 1, several hundred demonstrators smashed the windows and vandalized the building holding the Legislative Council; on August 11, a woman was shot in the eye by a projectile believed to have been fired by a police officer; and on August 13, protestors occupied the Hong Kong airport.⁷⁵

Chinese domestic state media initially produced a few articles condemning the violence and encouraging Hong Kong to return to the "rule of law and reason" (translated).⁷⁶ However, after the vandalism of the Legislative Council building on July 1, and as the PRC's image in the global arena began to suffer, its state media more actively attempted to control the narrative both internally and beyond its borders.⁷⁷ The domestically focused PRC media consistently delegitimized protestors, spread false narratives, and accused them of trying to incite an independence movement. For example, after the protester was shot in the eye on August 11, CCTV, China's state television network, reported the victim was actually injured by another protestor, contradicting witnesses' claims.⁷⁸ On Weibo, *China Daily* circulated a video of a protestor holding

a toy weapon, falsely claiming the toy was an M320 grenade launcher used by the U.S. Army and stoking fears of protester violence.⁷⁹ A November 18, 2019, editorial in the state media publication *People's Daily* asserted that the demonstrators aimed to “plunge Hong Kong into chaos, paralyze the city government, then seize power in the special administrative region to establish an independent or semi-independent political system.”⁸⁰

These domestic narratives from PRC state media were also spread internationally, including by way of social media platforms such as Facebook and Twitter. *People's Daily* took content that was performing well on Weibo and shared it to Twitter. For example, when Hong Kong protesters threw a Chinese flag into Victoria Harbor on August 3, CCTV covered it on Weibo with the note, “The five-star flag has 1.4 billion guardians.” The post was shared by more than 10 million people on Weibo; the *People's Daily* then reposted it on Twitter.⁸¹

In addition to overt messaging from PRC media outlets on Twitter, disinformation researchers, journalists, and Twitter users began to notice suspicious accounts echoing pro-PRC themes in social media activity. Researchers noted a surge in accounts with zero followers tweeting about Hong Kong and claiming to “correct” the narrative;⁸² these profiles asserted that they were Hong Kong locals, but their account locations were set to other locales such as Australia.⁸³ Journalists reported that thousands of accounts, each with only a few followers, were tweeting talking points in support of Beijing.⁸⁴

On August 19, 2019, shortly after press coverage of the dubious social media accounts began, Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube announced takedowns of state-backed coordinated inauthentic behavior, attributing the accounts to the PRC.⁸⁵ In its takedown announcement, Twitter noted that the accounts were used in an attempt to “sow political discord in Hong Kong” by “undermining the legitimacy and political positions of the protest movement on the ground.”⁸⁶ This takedown was the first information operation publically attributed to China on Western social media platforms. A second Twitter takedown followed on June 12, 2020, and was attributed to the same actor as the 2019 set;⁸⁷ those accounts additionally tweeted about Hong Kong.

Analysis

China's activities around the Hong Kong protests illustrate its deployment of several of its overt and covert capabilities—though some appear underutilized.

- Tightly aligned overt state media networks presented unified messaging aimed at countering unfavorable narratives that had reached both domestic and international audiences.
- Fake-account activity on Western social media platforms attempted to shape the global perception of the protesters and refute any sense that the CCP's control over Hong Kong was in jeopardy.

The subversive troll activity was expansive. Over the course of eleven months and across three platforms, nearly 375,000 inauthentic accounts were attributed to China and involved in the campaign related to Hong Kong.

August 2019	
Facebook ⁸⁸	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 7 Pages, 3 Groups, and 5 accounts suspended • Total Page followers: approximately 15,500 accounts followed one or more of these Pages • Total Group members: approximately 2,200 accounts
Twitter ⁸⁹	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Approximately 200,000 accounts suspended • Two datasets were released related to this takedown: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - 936 accounts disclosed on August 19, 2019 - 4,301 disclosed on September 20, 2019
YouTube ⁹⁰	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 210 channels suspended
June 2020	
Twitter ⁹¹	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 23,750 main accounts • Approximately 150,000 accounts designed to amplify the content of the main accounts

Table 2: Facebook, YouTube, and Twitter takedowns in August 2019 and June 2020 related to Hong Kong.

The narratives that state media pushed on its overt channels—maintaining the rule of law, describing protesters as violent thugs, and sowing confusion about events—were also observed in the Facebook and Twitter datasets. For example, posts related to the protester hit in the eye by the projectile were posted on both Facebook and Twitter and claimed to “correct” the narrative on social media, stating that the woman had actually been injured by other protesters (see Figure 4).

To provide more transparency about the influence operations detected on their platform, Twitter disclosed a subset of accounts and their tweets, releasing data from one cluster of accounts on two dates in 2019, and releasing a second dataset in June 2020. The datasets from the 2019 and 2020 takedowns were thematically similar; both overwhelmingly shared narratives discouraging or demonizing the pro-democracy demonstrations in Hong Kong. Many of the accounts in the 2020 dataset appear to have been created to reconstitute those lost in the first takedown.

The social media company takedowns provided a first look at attributed covert commenter accounts on major social platforms, revealing insights into China’s tactical choices for online influence operations. First, many of the Twitter accounts appeared to be purchased and repurposed. Most of the accounts in the first attributed set were created in 2019; however, a significant number were created much earlier, though investigation revealed the older accounts had tweeted in different languages and about completely unrelated topics (see Figure 5). For example, one account, @syidameoww, was created in 2013. It originally posted primarily in Malay, trying to gain followers and tweeting about Islam and the Arsenal football team. In a pattern common to many other accounts in the dataset, @syidameoww went dormant, in this case for four years, and suddenly became active again in July 2019, with tweets, now in Chinese, that defended the Hong Kong police and derided the protesters.

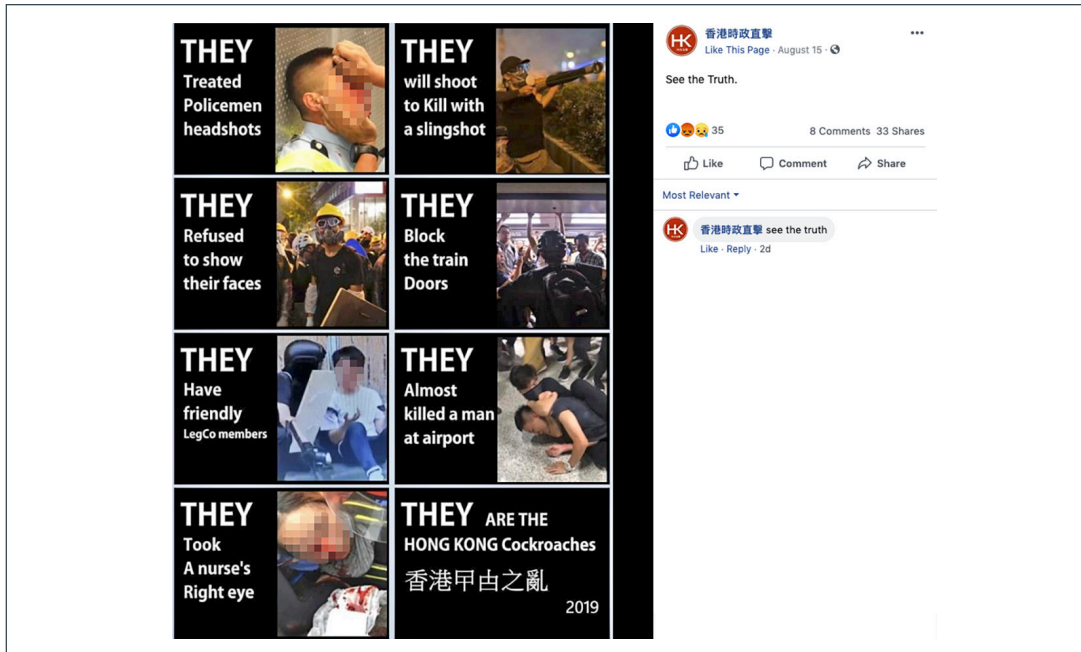


Figure 4: An example from the Facebook dataset of attributed accounts purporting to correct the record of what happened on the ground in Hong Kong. Nathaniel Gleicher, “Removing Coordinated Inauthentic Behavior from China,” Facebook News, August 19, 2019, <https://about.fb.com/news/2019/08/removing-cib-china/>.

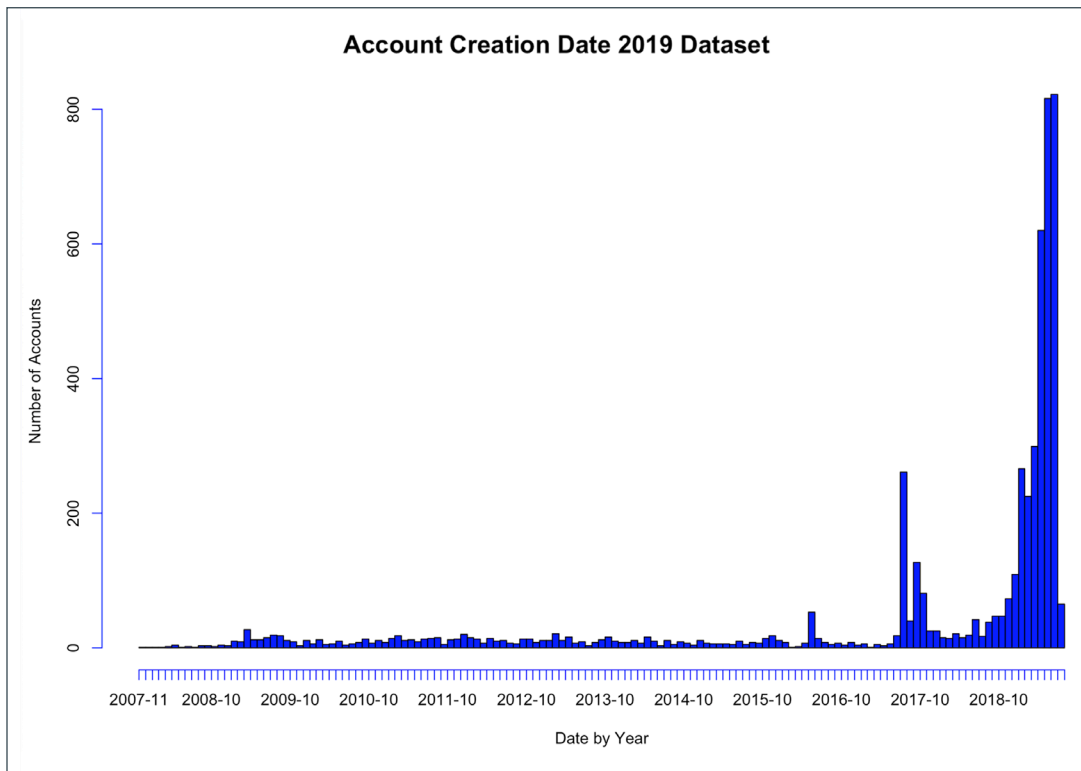


Figure 5: PRC-attributed Twitter accounts from the 2019 takedown. A majority of accounts were created in 2019; however, a notable number were created years before and repurposed for the influence operation.

The accounts had underdeveloped personas; most did not have bios or did not spend time tweeting about their purported backstories, though they claimed to be located all over the world.

Second, they appeared to get little engagement. About 55% of the 2019 accounts had no followers. Although the accounts were highly prolific, their tweets received very little engagement: the average account tweeted approximately 2,668 times but received an average engagement of only 1 favorite, reply, or retweet. This pattern of thin personas with little engagement was again observed in the June 2020 network takedown: About 78% of accounts had no followers, and the average account tweeted approximately 15 times with an average engagement of 0.81.

Two accounts stood out in contrast to the majority-low-engagement accounts in the dataset: @HKpoliticalnew and @ctcc507, which had the display name “Dream News.” @HKpoliticalnew and @ctcc507 had 22,551 followers and 14,895 followers respectively. As researchers have pointed out, these two accounts, both created in 2015, transformed from spam accounts to purported news media accounts:⁹² @HKpoliticalnew originally tweeted in English about celebrity gossip, until July 19, 2018, when it began tweeting CCP-aligned content discouraging independence movements in Taiwan and Hong Kong. The account also tweeted links to pro-police, anti-protester articles from a variety of media outlets, including speakout.hk and silentmajority.hk. Those media outlets resurfaced in the 2020 dataset as well; links to their YouTube channels were among the most shared of the 2020 YouTube content.

The @ctcc507 account—“Dream News”—began tweeting pro-CCP narratives in Chinese in 2015, praising Xi Jinping. The account went through a gap period in which it tweeted, largely in an automated fashion, about tech news, before beginning to tweet in English about the Hong Kong protests on June 22, 2019. Dream News almost exclusively tweeted news headlines and YouTube links to CCTV videos, most of which were apolitical, though some, such as the CCTV YouTube video, “Hong Kong Residents Rally in Support of Police,” amplified CCP narratives.⁹³



Figure 6: A tweet from @ctcc507, or “Dream News,” promoting an anti-protester narrative. Tweet screenshot taken from Twitter’s blog post announcing the takedown August 19, 2019.⁹⁴

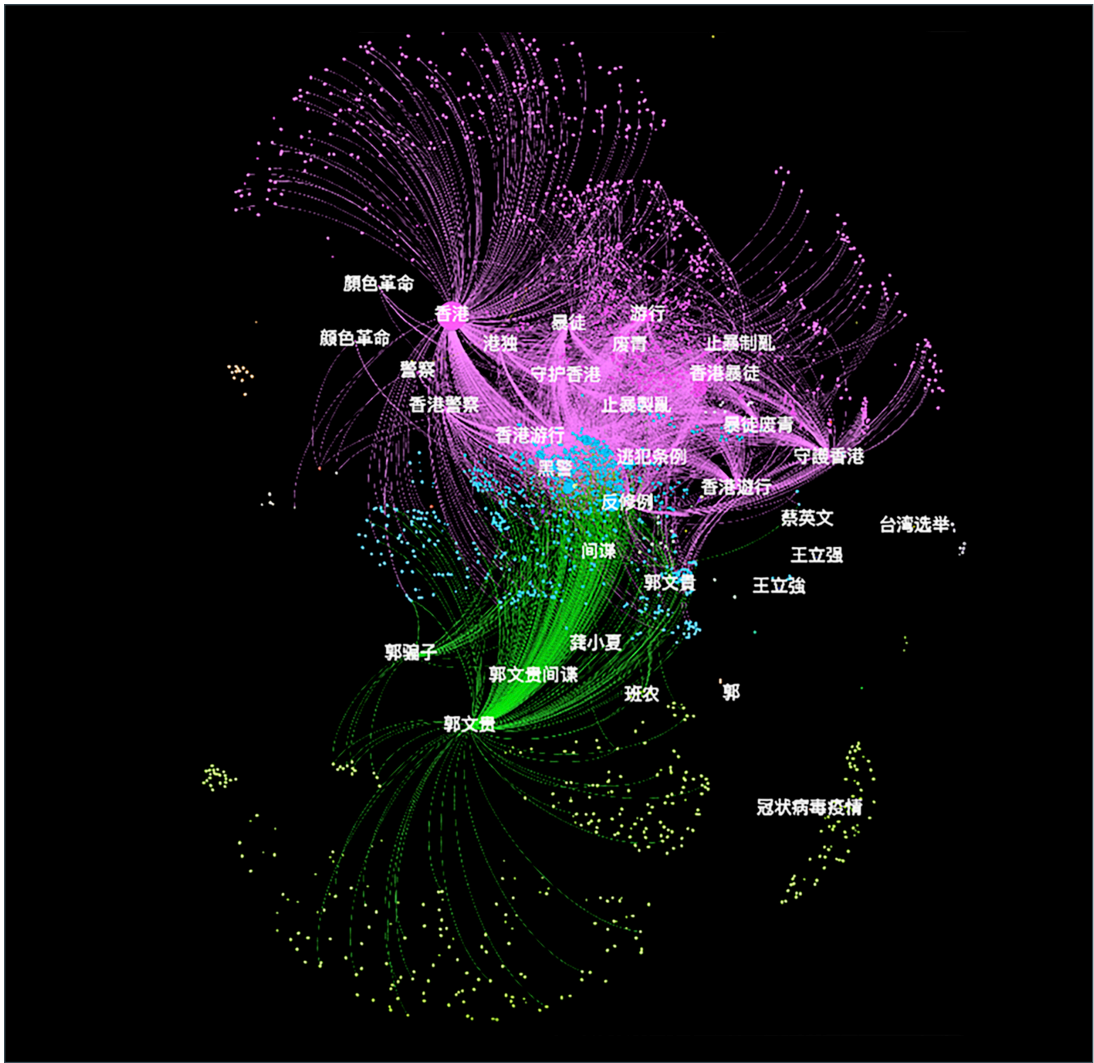


Figure 7: Hashtag graph generated by PRC-attributed accounts from the June 2020 Twitter takedown. These accounts began tweeting very soon after the first PRC-related takedown in August 2019 and continued to promote narratives from the previous network. The accounts in pink focused on Hong Kong hashtags, including 暴徒 “thug,” 守護香港/守护香港 “guard Hong Kong” (in traditional/simplified characters), and 香港警察, “Hong Kong police.” The accounts in green tweeted primarily about the Chinese billionaire Guo Wengui, and the accounts in the center of the graph, in blue, tweeted about both.⁹⁶

The accounts in the 2020 operation were caught early by Twitter; for the most part, this network did not seem to be built on the same type of repurposed spam accounts as in the 2019 dataset, but rather consisted largely of newly created accounts. However, the accounts were still underdeveloped as personas—thin or absent bios, sequential numerical usernames, minimal community engagement—and their inauthenticity was not well masked.

The Stanford Internet Observatory’s analysis of the network found that there was considerable overlap between the main narratives in the PRC’s influence operation in June 2020 and its operation in 2019; both focused on the protests’ violence and described the protesters as “thugs.” Accounts also continued to target Chinese billionaire Guo Wengui, who left China for self-imposed

exile in 2014. An outspoken critic of the CCP, Guo is on China’s most-wanted list and was a popular topic of the 2019 dataset. Researchers at the Australian Strategic Policy Institute (ASPI) observed that some tweets from 2019 targeting Guo suggested he was involved with the Hong Kong protests; one tweet claimed he was “openly supporting violent demonstrations” (translated).⁹⁵ Similar overlapping content about Guo and Hong Kong was present in the 2020 takedown dataset as well.

Despite the underdeveloped personas and thin engagement, disinformation researcher Nick Monaco from the think tank Institute for the Future noted that “significant effort” was made to localize political messages about the protests in the first dataset: while some tweets used simplified Chinese, a majority were in Cantonese (used in Hong Kong), rather than Mandarin (used in mainland China).⁹⁷ Similarly, accounts in the June 2020 set once again tweeted in both simplified and traditional characters, though the language was primarily localized: in a random sample of 100 tweets focused on Hong Kong, 64 were written in traditional characters.

Implications

The Hong Kong campaign provided the first concrete evidence that the CCP is willing to execute online covert influence operations targeting Western audiences using inauthentic social media personas. As researchers pointed out, this activity shared several similarities with past state-sponsored operations from other actors such as Russia and Iran: using high-volume bot accounts, co-opting spam infrastructure (Twitter clients) to spread political messages, and amplifying controversial content.⁹⁸

However, there were a few notable differences between the Chinese effort and past attributed Russian efforts. First, as ASPI noted in its report, “Tweeting through the Great Firewall,” the Chinese operation did not tweet narratives from both sides of the debate—it focused on pro-China content.⁹⁹ Second, the activity was relatively easy to spot: the Twitter accounts formally attributed to the PRC were not well-developed personas built up methodically over a period of years. They had no strong ties to targeted communities or influencers who would amplify their reach. They were, comparatively, sloppy. More perplexingly, they do not seem to have executed any operational improvements to the similarly flimsy persona accounts observed in the second network (taken down over six months later). This raises questions about whether the type of activity that has worked for 50 Cent Party commenter activity within China’s social media ecosystem has led to incorrect estimations by the CCP about the credulity of international audiences on Twitter and Facebook.

While China did not use its covert digital capabilities to their fullest potential, its repeated Hong Kong-related information campaigns reinforce the extent to which shaping public opinion on Western social media is of value to the CCP. Interestingly, however, negative backlash resulting from the August 2019 takedown and exposure of the brazen covert campaign may be one of the reasons that Twitter and Facebook do not seem to have figured as prominently in China’s influence operations targeting Taiwan’s 2020 presidential election.

The Twitter accounts formally attributed to the PRC were not well-developed personas built up methodically over a period of years.

4.2 The 2020 Taiwan Presidential Election: A Spy Controversy and Political Misinformation Spread via Multiple Media Streams

Background

The January 2020 presidential election between the incumbent Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) candidate Tsai Ing-wen and Nationalist Party (KMT) candidate Han Kuo-yu was of strategic importance to mainland China: it was, in part, a referendum on the nature of Taiwan's future ties with Beijing, which asserts territorial claims over the self-ruled island. The KMT has historically supported stronger ties to China and eventual unification, while the DPP has historically backed Taiwanese independence.¹⁰⁰ Under President Tsai Ing-wen, the Taiwan-China relationship became even more tense.

Following suspicious activity in the 2018 Taiwanese local elections, and activity directly attributed to China during the 2019-2020 Hong Kong protests, concerns about interference from Beijing made the Taiwanese presidential election a closely watched contest. Compounding matters, two months before the election, a self-declared Chinese spy—Wang “William” Liqiang—emerged, offering information about purported covert activities in exchange for asylum in Australia. Wang claimed he had participated in meddling in the 2018 Taiwanese local elections by creating 200,000 fake social media accounts, additionally revealing that a Hong Kong front company created twenty other “internet companies” to attack the DPP. Wang also alleged he gave RMB 1.5 billion (over US\$200 million) to Taiwanese media properties to promote Han's campaign for Kaohsiung mayor. Wang's claims became a major story; in Taiwan, assessments of his credibility split along party lines, and domestic and global concerns about the upcoming election increased.¹⁰¹

Many of the groups active in supporting Han in the 2018 mayoral election were similarly active in the presidential campaign. “Netizens” on both sides participated in using coordinated activism to boost their preferred candidates. This activity, at times, veered into the realm of terms-of-service violations; at one point, Facebook took action on a cluster of Pages for using fake accounts to spread messages.¹⁰² One Page gained attention in the media coverage of the takedown as one of the largest Groups in the Han Kuo-yu camp. Group 2020 韓國瑜總統後援會 (總會), “2020 Han Kuo-yu presidential support group (General group),” had approximately 150,000 members, and several of the moderators for the Group had suspect accounts: stolen profile pictures of a famous actress, minimal engagement on posts.¹⁰³ These profiles were also suspended in the takedown. This takedown illustrates the challenge of separating coordinated activism from coordinated inauthentic activity indicative of foreign interference.

Despite concerns of PRC interference heightened by the self-described spy and the takedown of inauthentic accounts connected to domestic activists, any possible election interference on behalf of Han was ultimately unsuccessful in changing the outcome: Tsai secured a second term by a wide margin.

Analysis

China deployed a combination of influence capabilities across both traditional media and social media during Taiwan's 2020 presidential campaign, also utilizing grey propaganda properties to help obscure mainland influence.

- Aligned messaging between overt Chinese state media and Beijing-friendly Taiwanese media outlets, which had deeper penetration into the Taiwanese information ecosphere, were jointly leveraged in attempts to sway public opinion against President Tsai Ing-wen and her party.
- Unattributable content farms created and amplified misinformation by sharing political content on networks of Facebook Pages and the LINE messaging app; the obscure origins of these properties provided protection in the form of plausible deniability of Chinese influence.
- Dubious YouTube channels, at least one of which was revealed to be tied to mainland actors, attempted to appear Taiwanese while promoting rumors and false information about President Tsai Ing-wen. Fake Twitter accounts concretely attributed to China were also used to link to YouTube videos amplifying Chinese talking points on divisive topics such as self-declared spy Wang Liqiang.

Media narratives: overt propaganda

The Wang Liqiang spy affair was a bombshell. The story became a narrative battleground between pro- and anti-mainland groups in Taiwan, and China itself participated in shaping the narrative to support its geopolitical interest in Taiwan. As soon as the story broke, Chinese state media such as Xinhua, *China Daily*, CCTV, and *Global Times* began to disparage Wang and his claims. An article in Xinhua stated that Wang had faked his story, that his identification documents were fake, and that he had in fact been unemployed in China; the article appeared verbatim in *China Daily* and on CCTV as well.¹⁰⁴ State media framed the story as a “spy farce”; *Global Times* claimed that Wang was not old enough to be a senior spy.¹⁰⁵

Taiwan’s traditional media appeared to be an especially valuable asset in disseminating Beijing’s messages in the Taiwanese information space. Domestic news outlets shaped much of the partisan discussion about the Wang story on social media in Taiwan; mainland state media appears to have had a smaller impact. Although Taiwan’s media ecosystem is considered representative of many different viewpoints, some of its popular newspapers, such as *China Times*, are perceived as sympathetic to China and, therefore, as potential vehicles for mainland influence.¹⁰⁶ In July 2019, for example, the Financial Times reported that *China Times* receives editorial instructions from the Taiwan Affairs Office on how to frame topics related to cross-strait relations.¹⁰⁷

Wang’s claims were widely covered in Taiwanese media. Its four main publications took divergent approaches in their coverage of the alleged spy’s allegations: while Apple Daily and Liberty Times Net took a more neutral stance in the developing story, media outlets considered friendly toward Beijing (e.g., *China Times*) and KMT-supportive press (e.g., *United Daily News*) aligned their narratives with those from the mainland.¹⁰⁸ These Taiwanese publications uniformly aimed to discredit Wang, reporting that his claims were “highly suspect” and suggesting they should be dismissed because he was a “mediocre spy.”¹⁰⁹ In one article, *China Times* helped amplify the CCP state media narratives by reporting that the Taiwan Affairs Office, an administrative agency of the CCP, had confirmed the spy story was a scam led by President Tsai Ing-wen and her party.¹¹⁰

While articles from official Beijing media outlets were spread minimally on Facebook (they usually had only the one original post on their Facebook Pages), those from *China Times* and *United Daily*

News were shared widely. For example, both *Global Times* and *China Times* published articles claiming Wang Liqiang had appeared in court for fraud charges, a story put forth in an exclusive by *Global Times*.¹¹¹ While the *Global Times* article was only posted to two Facebook Pages and shared 17 times on Facebook, the Taiwan-based *China Times* article was posted to over 100 Pages and Groups and shared 1,100 times. Taiwanese Facebook users consistently appear to engage more with Taiwanese media outlets. Therefore, their coverage or amplification of China’s political messages, such as those that come from the Taiwan Affairs Office, appear to reach a wider audience.

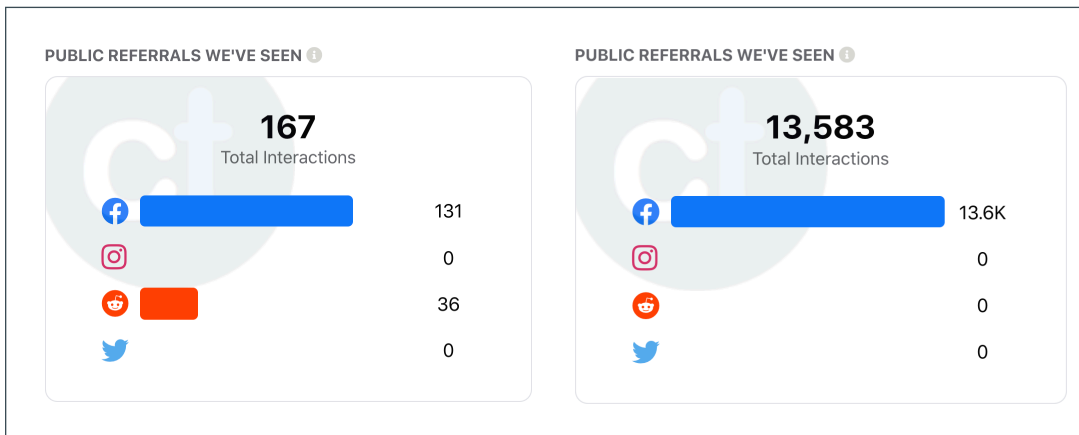


Figure 8: Comparison of total interactions (reactions, comments, shares) of the *Global Times* article (left) versus the *China Times* article (right) across social media platforms as of June 18, 2020 (data from CrowdTangle). Because data from Twitter is only captured within seven days of a tweet, Twitter interactions are not visible.

Although Chinese state media had minimal penetration into Taiwanese social media discussions, the Taiwanese China- and KMT-friendly media drove discussions on both sides of the political divide. DPP online communities rarely shared articles written by pro-China outlets, but they discussed their claims—and, with this specific story, defended Liqiang. Thus, although the media was local, the stories Beijing promoted about Liqiang still influenced the topics of discussion and debate within local Facebook Groups (see Figure 9).

Social media activities: covert influence

The Taiwanese population’s significant use of the social web makes the region an ideal target for digital influence operations. As of January 2020, the social media penetration rate was 88%.¹¹² Although they are blocked in China, Facebook and YouTube are not only accessible in Taiwan but are in fact the two most popular social platforms.¹¹³ The third, LINE, also has a high penetration rate in Taiwan—in a population of almost 24 million, there are 21 million monthly active users.¹¹⁴

Content farms on Facebook and LINE networks

In addition to Chinese state media’s aligned messaging with some of Taiwan’s mainstream media outlets, grey propaganda properties such as content farms attempted to sway public opinion in the lead-up to Taiwan’s election by presenting PRC-favorable perspectives on the future of cross-strait relations and amplifying rumors about the DPP. Concerns over Chinese content farms are not unique to the 2020 election: in May 2019, the National Security Bureau, Taiwan’s principal intelligence agency, issued a report that identified content farms as one mode by which the CCP



Figure 9: A post from a pro-DPP Facebook Page responding to attempts made by Chinese state media to smear the defecting alleged spy. The post finds the Chinese state media’s efforts “too funny” (translated).

disseminated fabricated messages, noting that some misinformation reposted on content farms was produced by China Review News Agency (中國評論新聞), a supposedly Hong Kong-based think tank co-founded by a Communist party member.¹¹⁵ Similarly, content farm coco01 had previously been flagged by the National Security Bureau for spreading misinformation about Taiwan’s government.¹¹⁶

In the months before the 2020 election, researchers and investigative journalists in Taiwan observed that content farms helped spread false information through networks of Facebook

Pages and the messaging app LINE. As discussed in Section 3.3, investigations into content farms' pro-China narratives have led to a deeper understanding of a potential link between the content farm mission-tw.com (or "Mission") and China. Mission was prominently shared on Facebook along with, albeit to a lesser extent, the Taiwanese content farm nooho.net (or "Roar") which also promoted mission articles.¹¹⁷

These two content farms amplified rumors and criticized the DPP and Tsai Ing-wen. For example, Roar published content that promoted misinformation and deepened party divisions: articles disputed the size of an anti-Han Kuo-yu rally in December 2019, questioned Tsai Ing-wen's doctoral degree, and amplified a local rumor about the price of peanut imports in Yunlin county, which had become a point of contention between the two parties.¹¹⁸ Mission's articles also included inaccurate claims: one article from March 2019 claimed that the Ministry of National Defense planned to buy US\$13 billion worth of "outdated aircrafts," eliciting a denial from the Ministry. During the campaign, fact-checking platform Cofacts was asked to verify 39 articles from Mission; of those, only four of the contested claims turned out to be true. Some of Mission's articles were pulled directly from *China Times*.¹¹⁹ The Reporter's investigation also uncovered connections between Mission and Chinese influence efforts involving the farm's operators. For example, it revealed that Lin Zhengguo, a member of Taiwan's pro-unification New Party, was "a consultant" to Mission, which was stated in the source code of the website; he attended the launch of a Chinese media outlet in Fujian Province; and he claimed to operate another outlet that produced content for Mission and plagiarized articles from Xinhua and Taiwan.cn.¹²⁰ Mission also published articles from a reporter who participated in an event organized for cross-strait media by the Sichuan Provincial Taiwan Affairs Office;¹²¹ this is evocative of the behaviors of the United Front, as discussed earlier in this paper, which works to influence public opinion through these events or "exchanges."

Mission had significant reach within pro-Han Kuo-yu and KMT fan Facebook Pages and Groups, such as Group 2020韓國瑜總統後援會 (總會). According to The Reporter, in one week in April 2019, it was the most shared website by Taiwanese Facebook users. Articles from both Mission and Roar were observed to be shared across multiple fan Pages within seconds of each other, possibly indicating coordination. In October and December 2019, Facebook blocked hundreds of content farms' URLs from being shared, including Mission. Nevertheless, Mission resurfaced via multiple associated domains such as missiback.com and pplomo.com, the latter of which can still be shared on Facebook.¹²²

Though the extent of China's influence on Taiwan's content farms is difficult to quantify, the connection to Fujian, plagiarism of Chinese and Chinese-friendly outlets, and the personal beliefs of the content farm owners suggest that these media properties are a useful tool with which to plant false information and influence conversations about Taiwanese politics, including during the presidential campaign.

Suspicious and Fake Accounts on YouTube and Twitter

In the months before the 2020 elections, the Taiwanese government, academics, and disinformation researchers raised concerns about China exerting influence on the election via YouTube.¹²³ The potential reach was significant—89% of Taiwanese use the platform.¹²⁴ Disinformation researchers such as Puma Shen, at National Taipei University, noticed suspect channels and videos with attributes that suggested mainland ties, including the use of third-party payment systems linked to China, such as Alipay QR codes that require a Chinese bank account. Shen also noted that some videos used phrases only common in mainland China, and errors in subtitles that might occur when converting simplified Chinese to traditional Chinese.¹²⁵

One example of a suspicious channel, as reported by the *New York Times*, was 希達說台灣—玉山腳下 (“Xida speaks on Taiwan—At the foot of Yushan”).¹²⁶ Though it was created in 2014, the channel did not post anything until five years later, during the presidential campaign; it was active for about three months, from August to October 2019, before it once again stopped uploading videos. The channel was run by a YouTuber who appeared to be a concerned Taiwanese citizen: he spoke Taiwanese-accented Mandarin and his captions used traditional Chinese characters. The channel’s content amplified rumors that caught the attention of Taiwan’s Bureau of Investigation; one video claimed that Tsai Ing-wen is “selling” Taiwan to the United States and Japan (in other words, establishing an economic partnership that substantially benefited the latter two countries), and another denounced Tsai Ing-wen’s government and questioned the validity of her PhD. However, in the description of one of the videos, a character was incorrectly translated from simplified to traditional Chinese, which suggested to researchers that the host was possibly not Taiwanese.¹²⁷ The channel creator was subsequently revealed to be a Chinese state media reporter in October 2019.¹²⁸

YouTube content targeting Taiwan also surfaced in the Twitter takedown from June 2020. Twitter is not as popular in Taiwan as it is in Hong Kong, which may explain why Taiwan-related tweets made up a small portion (approximately 1%) of the dataset. Of these tweets, 45 of them shared links to sixteen YouTube videos in the months leading up to and right after the election. The videos were used to support similar narratives discussed above, but framed in relation to the Taiwanese election: attacking Guo Wengui for weighing in on Taiwan’s hot button issues, and highlighting the importance of safeguarding Chinese unity against Tsai Ing-wen’s purported pro-independence campaign.

A few of the YouTube videos also focused on discrediting the self-described spy Wang Liqiang’s claim that he had meddled with the Taiwanese local election in 2018. However, a notable finding from the Twitter dataset was that about half of all Taiwan-related tweets were from November 25 to 27, when the story of the defecting spy was unfolding (see Figure 10). The term “fraud” (translated) was often associated with Wang; some tweets quoted from a report from the Shanghai Public Security Bureau, amplifying their claim that Wang was a fugitive. The fake Twitter accounts claimed that President Tsai Ing-wen had fabricated the Wang Liqiang case in order to slander Han Kuo-yu and gain more votes—a popular narrative that was additionally circulating in the pro-Han Facebook community.¹²⁹

Implications

While concrete attribution of activity on certain content farms and channels remains a challenge, China demonstrably leveraged a combination of traditional media and fake social media accounts in an attempt to influence the political process during Taiwan’s 2020 presidential election. Chinese media content was influential in setting the agenda for conversations within both of Taiwan’s political party camps, and in driving division between groups who came to believe different versions of the same story. Thus, China’s ability to place its own state media narratives into sympathetic channels within Taiwanese mainstream media offers a unique and significant advantage to its overall influence capabilities.

While much of the concern about state actor influence in political elections focuses on social media manipulation, the Taiwan case study reiterates the importance of traditional narrative

The channel was run by a YouTuber who appeared to be a concerned Taiwanese citizen: he spoke Taiwanese-accented Mandarin and his captions used traditional Chinese characters.

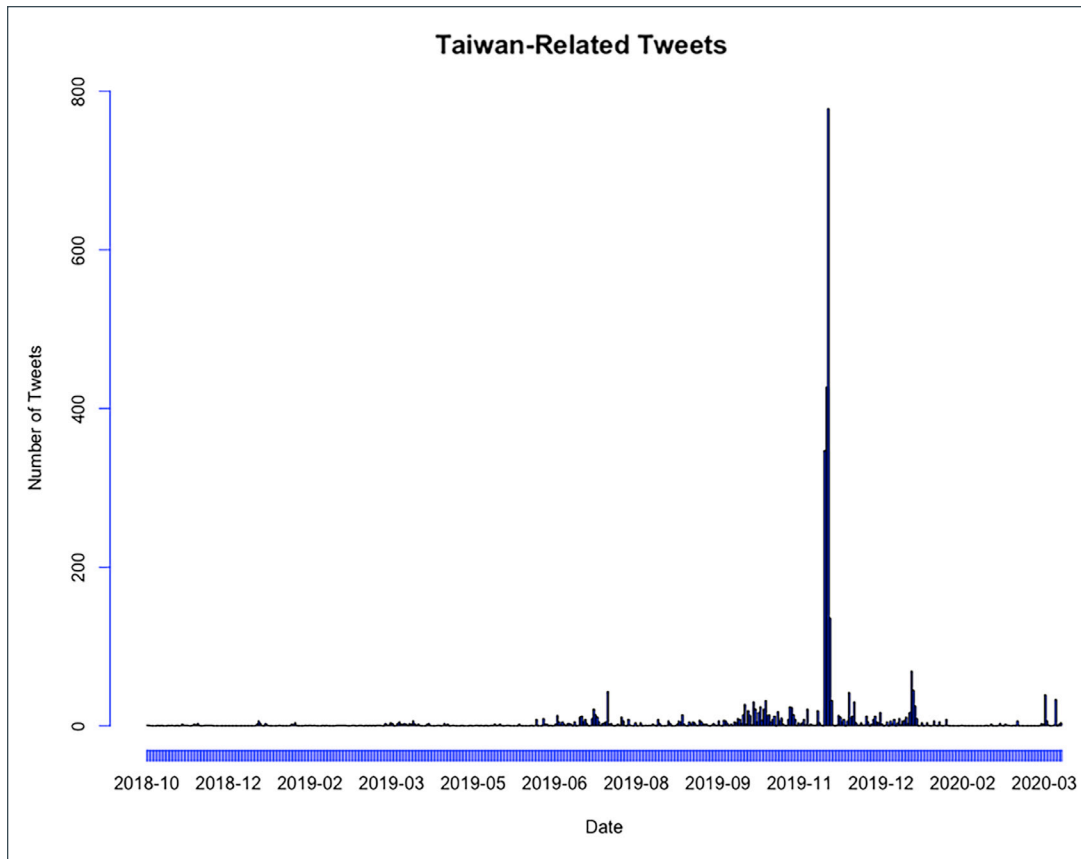


Figure 10: Tweets with Taiwan-related terms spiked significantly in late November 2019, as the story of the alleged spy Wang Liqiang was unfolding.¹³⁰

propaganda. Aside from suspicious YouTube channels and minimal activity on Twitter, China did not appear to leverage fake accounts on popular Western social media platforms to spread disinformation during the Taiwan 2020 presidential election. Although a cluster of accounts and Pages was removed from Facebook during the campaign, they were attributed to coordinated domestic actors—a reminder that not all inauthentic political activity comes from outside.¹³¹

In our final, and most recent case study—the story of China’s narrative control efforts related to the COVID-19 pandemic—we explore the ways in which the full spectrum of overt and covert capabilities has been put to use in a far more coordinated way.

4.3 The COVID-19 Pandemic: Censorship, Conspiracies, and Cross-Platform Propaganda

Background

In January 2020, stories began to surface suggesting that a new, virulent form of pneumonia had emerged from the Huanan seafood market of Wuhan. Soon after, it emerged that the disease

was the result of a novel coronavirus, which was spreading rapidly and had no known effective treatment. While the world has experienced other serious disease outbreaks in the age of social media, COVID-19 is unique in that it has developed into a global pandemic—the disease has infected millions and claimed hundreds of thousands of lives around the world—that commands sustained worldwide attention.

As the disease first emerged, medical whistleblowers in China tried to warn the country, while the CCP took significant steps to censor negative coverage of the pandemic. Several Chinese activists and journalists who shared videos from the emerging crisis in Wuhan disappeared. Chen Qiushi, a lawyer-turned-citizen-journalist, went missing February 6.¹³² Journalist Li Zehua was detained by police on February 26 after reporting on an alleged attempt to cover up the number of infections in Wuhan; when he resurfaced two months later, his coverage changed to praising the police who detained him.¹³³ Fang Bin, a businessman who shared a video of piling corpses outside a Wuhan hospital, disappeared on February 9.¹³⁴ Academics and doctors were similarly silenced and detained. The most prominent example is ophthalmologist Li Wenliang, one of the first to report the existence of the novel disease and warn fellow medics in a chat group on December 30, 2019. Dr. Li was later detained by police and forced to sign a letter stating he had made “false comments.” He gained prominence on social media for both his warnings and his later COVID-19 illness and death.

The significant public anger that erupted over Li’s death created a very dangerous moment for the Chinese regime and required Chinese media to delicately balance covering his story without casting the government in a bad light.¹³⁵ Unlike others who were silenced—such as Chen Qiushi, who Chinese Ambassador to the United States Cui Tiankai repeatedly claimed he’d never heard of—Li Wenliang was recognized by the Chinese government as a “martyr” who “sacrificed his life.”¹³⁶

In addition to its revisionist approach in framing Dr. Li’s warnings, Chinese state media gradually promoted an evolving conspiracy theory to shift blame for the spread of the virus away from itself and onto other countries. In the earliest state media coverage of the virus, the outbreak was unambiguously acknowledged to have begun in Wuhan. Gradually, the narrative was reframed to incorporate “uncertainty” about COVID-19’s origin. First, the uncertainty focused on what unknown *animal* had transmitted the virus.¹³⁷ Then, the uncertainty broadened to *where* the virus had originated in the first place.¹³⁸ Finally, the media, and prominent influencer accounts including government officials, began to promote a conspiracy theory alleging that the virus could have in fact been carried to Wuhan by humans—specifically, by U.S. military personnel who had taken part in the Military World Games in Wuhan in November 2019.¹³⁹ This theory, still propagated in state media reports as of May 2020, has given way to another main narrative: the origin of the virus is unknown and yet to be determined by scientists, and any other idea amounts to unfounded speculation.¹⁴⁰

The perception of China’s handling of the novel coronavirus pandemic is a significant challenge for the CCP, both domestically and abroad. There has been sustained unrest on Chinese social media platforms, along with allegations in the global press suggesting that the CCP mishandled the crisis and covered up data related to the outbreak’s severity. To manage the public relations crisis, the CCP has leveraged all of the traditional and digital media capabilities at its disposal in its attempt to control the narrative and deflect blame, both within China and abroad, using both overt and covert tactics.¹⁴¹

Analysis

China's influence strategy on COVID-19 involved a full spectrum of overt and covert tactics aimed at managing Beijing's image both domestically and abroad.

- Censorship of individuals and information channels offered China control over domestic perception of the virus and limited international reporting on the emerging outbreak within China.
- English-language state media Facebook Pages, several with over 50 million followers, bolstered their reach even further via targeted ads on the platform, allowing China's desired narratives to reach considerable worldwide audiences.
- Chinese diplomats and embassies engaged in increasingly hostile messaging toward other countries—what has been dubbed “Wolf Warrior diplomacy”¹⁴²—on Twitter to criticize other governments and amplify the CCP's preferred narratives in order to demonstrate China's strength and combat its negative images internationally.
- Covert state-sponsored activity on Western social media platforms paralleled overt narratives by praising the CCP's pandemic response and criticizing the responses of other actors, such as the United States, Hong Kong, and Taiwan.

Domestic control

Domestically, the Chinese government has tried to control the narrative about the novel coronavirus since early in the outbreak. At first, this meant dictating which journalists were allowed to report on COVID-19, and how. As whistleblowers began to disappear in early February, Xi Jinping, on February 3, instructed Chinese media to make China's disease response look heroic.¹⁴³ The following day, the CCPD dispatched 300 state media reporters to Wuhan and Hubei province to “provide strong public opinion support” (提供强有力的舆论支持).¹⁴⁴ This action came amid increased restrictions on foreign journalists in China, with expulsions of three *Wall Street Journal* reporters on February 19, 2020, followed by expulsions of all U.S. journalists at the *Wall Street Journal*, *Washington Post*, and *New York Times* in mid-March in retaliation for new restrictions on Chinese state media operating in the United States.¹⁴⁵ These combined measures have led to significantly less independent and unbiased coverage of the virus to counter that from the state media apparatus.

China additionally suppressed and censored information related to the coronavirus pandemic on Chinese social media platforms.¹⁴⁶ Two days after Xi Jinping's February 3 speech, the Cyberspace Administration of China (CAC) issued a directive announcing new measures. In the directive, the CAC ordered the removal of the short video app “Pipi Gaoxiao” (皮皮搞笑) from app stores, citing “harmful” videos on the coronavirus that had “spread panic.” The CAC further announced that various Chinese social media companies including Sina Weibo, Tencent, and ByteDance would now be under “special supervision” (专项督导), in effect mandating self-censorship.¹⁴⁷ Following this directive, these social media platforms implemented more stringent control, suspending thousands of individual accounts that were found to have spread “sensitive information or illegal content.”¹⁴⁸ Volunteers took to the U.S.-based platform GitHub to archive Chinese media reports and social media commentary, attempting to preserve them in case they were later removed by censors.¹⁴⁹ Chinese authorities reacted by arresting some of the GitHub contributors in mid-April, and the GitHub project is now private.¹⁵⁰

International propaganda across overt and covert channels

While much of the inward-facing narrative management around COVID-19 involved cheerleading and censorship, in its communication to international audiences, Chinese state media coverage on the pandemic initially focused on creating and amplifying positive stories about Chinese competence and success.¹⁵¹ For example, as U.S. media reported on patients that were “sick” or “affected” by the coronavirus, Chinese state media English-language content emphasized terms such as “treating,” “recovered,” “discharged,” and “cured.”¹⁵²

However, as it became clear that China’s actions had not contained the pandemic, the increasingly tense geopolitical dynamics were reflected and exacerbated in the information space. China, through its embassies and foreign ministry officials’ social media accounts, increasingly engaged in aggressive “Wolf Warrior diplomacy.”¹⁵³ One prominent example was Zhao Lijian, a deputy director-general of the Chinese Foreign Ministry’s Information Department, who played a key role in spreading the conspiracy theory of U.S. military involvement in the virus’s origin on Twitter.¹⁵⁴



Figure 11: A screenshot taken June 25, 2020, of a tweet from Zhao Lijian, the deputy director of the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs Information Department. The tweet amplified the conspiracy that the U.S. military was involved in the virus’s origin. Lijian’s tweet is a prime example of “Wolf Warrior” diplomacy.

Beijing’s international communication strategy also involved the use of its extensive state media presence on Facebook through advertising.¹⁵⁵ The seven main English-language Chinese state media Facebook Pages have an average of 70.9 million followers (see Table 1), providing the party apparatus considerable reach. The Facebook ads run by these Pages enabled the state media properties to proactively target users worldwide with boosted posts featuring their messages—even if the users had never previously indicated interest in Chinese state communications. In mid-February 2020, in the midst of the messaging war over coronavirus, several Chinese state media Facebook Pages launched a new Facebook ad offensive; between January 2019 and the end

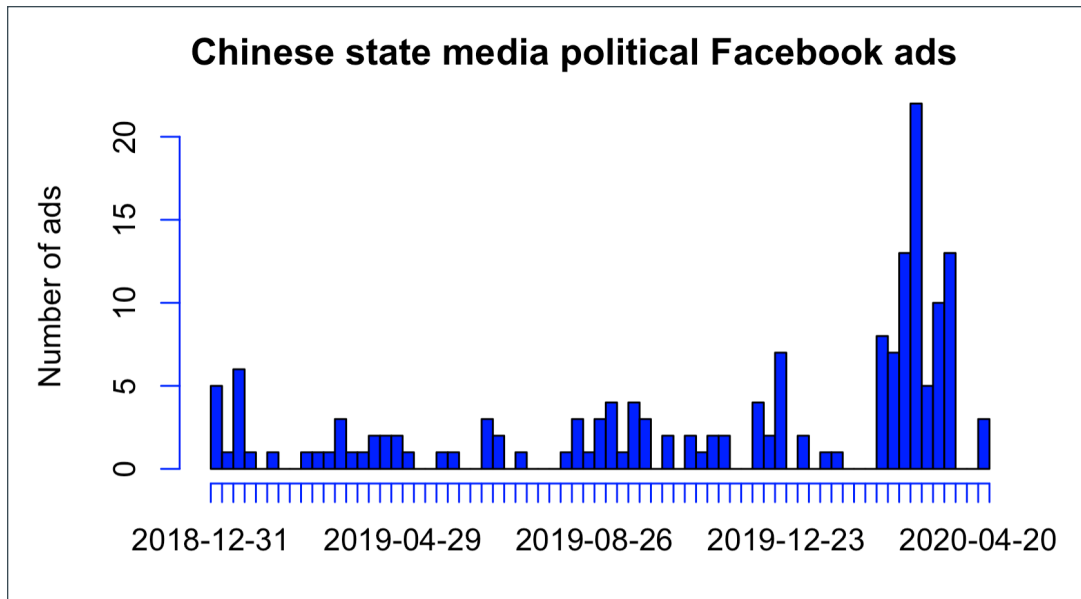


Figure 12: The number of Chinese state media Facebook advertisements per week between January 1, 2019, and March 29, 2020. More than half of all advertisements were created in the period from January 1, 2020, to March 29, 2020.

of March 2020, nearly 40% of political Facebook ads run by Chinese state media were launched on or after February 15, 2020, just as the pandemic was ramping up globally (see Figure 12).


Talking points promoted in the ads included emphasizing the Chinese government’s alleged transparency in its pandemic response, cheering Xi Jinping for visiting a hospital treating coronavirus patients, and promoting the idea that Beijing’s sharing of COVID-19 information was helping the world battle the pandemic (see Figure 13).¹⁵⁶

In addition, China’s efforts to control the narrative on COVID-19 included covert tactics such as employing pro-China troll and persona accounts on Western social media platforms. Researchers at ProPublica, Bellingcat, and ASPI speculated on suspicious networks of accounts beginning in March 2020. A ProPublica investigation published on March 26, 2020, posited that the Chinese government had created fake Twitter accounts and hacked existing ones to spread Chinese propaganda.¹⁵⁸ On April 17, 2020, researchers from the International Cyber Policy Centre (ICPC) at ASPI identified another coordinated Twitter campaign they believed to be Chinese accounts posing as Taiwanese users.¹⁵⁹ These accounts aimed to undermine Taiwan’s position with the WHO, harass Western media, and spread false information about the outbreak. Lastly, in May 2020, a BBC News investigation led by Bellingcat researcher Benjamin Strick found a network of fake accounts that included 1,000 Twitter accounts, 53 Facebook Pages, 61 Facebook accounts, and 187 YouTube channels that amplified government talking points about COVID-19. The accounts did not get much engagement from genuine users outside the network.¹⁶⁰ After they were flagged, these accounts were suspended for spam-like behavior.

A few weeks after the BBC’s investigation, on June 10, 2020, Twitter took down a network of accounts and formally attributed them to the PRC. Some were linked to the accounts the Bellingcat team had flagged. The origin of others, such as a network of allegedly fake Taiwanese accounts identified by ICPC, remains unknown.

CGTN Sponsored
ID: 1323607414693485


Please note: "The fight against #coronavirus needs science, not stigma."



Please note: The fight against coronavirus needs science, not stigma.

CGTN Sponsored
ID: 222767205793847

"For the Chinese government, people's safety and health always come first," said Chinese President #XiJinping. Watch the video to find out how President Xi has led China's battle against the #coronavirus outbreak. #GuanghuaStudio



Xi Jinping: 'People's safety and health always come first'

Figure 13: Examples of advertisements by Chinese state media CGTN on the COVID-19 pandemic criticizing U.S. president Donald Trump and praising the Chinese government.¹⁵⁷

Chinese narratives on COVID-19 show parallels across overt and covert outlets, with both state media coverage and covert activity for the most part ignoring the outbreak at its start, then suddenly ramping up coverage and discussion from late January into February. SIO's research found that tweets on COVID-19 from the June 2020 takedown included cheering on the Chinese government, emphasizing Chinese unity, and criticizing the U.S. pandemic response. Most of the tweets (78.8%) in the dataset were written in Chinese, with a smaller share written in English (9.4%) and Russian (1.8%). In the 23,750 accounts in the June 2020 Twitter dataset, COVID-19-related tweets prior to February 2020 were few and centered around criticizing various actors for

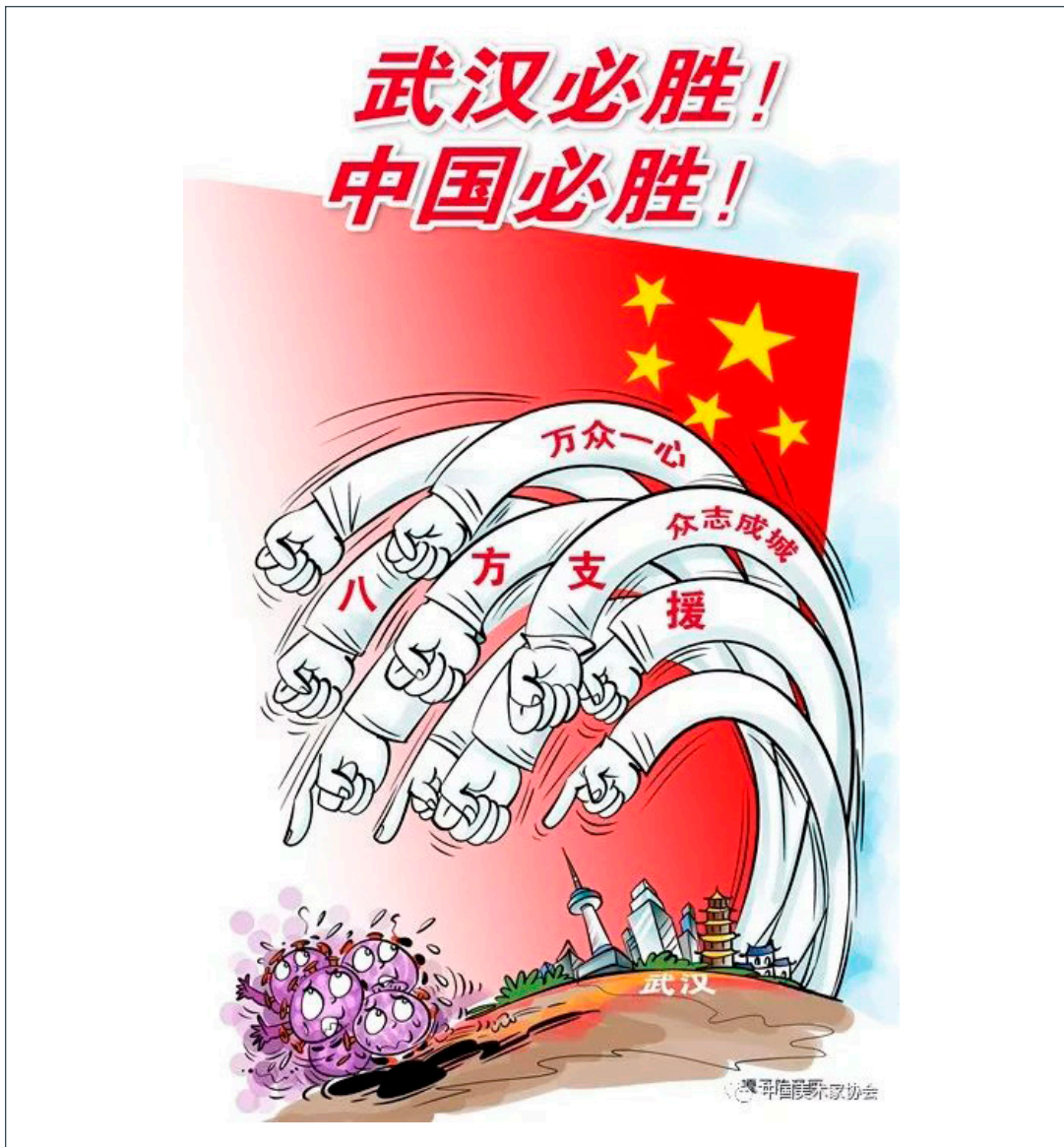


Figure 14: An image shared in a tweet from a fake account attributed to the PRC displayed support for the PRC's efforts to combat COVID-19. The text on the tweet translates to, "Wuhan must win! China must win!"

their alleged spread of rumors about the severity of the outbreak. Starting in February, however, the coronavirus pandemic was one of the main topics of conversation.¹⁶¹

As the epidemic situation worsened, the narrative shifted to cheering on the Chinese government's pandemic response, downplaying Taiwan's success, and applauding the Hong Kong police and government for their actions on COVID-19 (while criticizing Hong Kong protesters for continuing their activities during a pandemic). In March, when the center of the coronavirus outbreak moved to Europe and reported cases in China fell rapidly, the Twitter accounts began commending China's pandemic response success and asserting that the coronavirus was the "world's enemy." As reported cases in the United States started to rise rapidly and U.S.

government leaders continued making comments blaming China for the outbreak, accounts in the network criticized the U.S. pandemic response and called on the White House to learn from China's successes.

The significantly fewer English-language tweets on the topic—most content was tweeted in Chinese, likely targeting the diaspora—asserted the Chinese government had acted swiftly and transparently to address COVID-19, contesting the notion that China had at first covered up the pandemic. Other tweets criticized Steve Bannon for allegedly writing fake news on the coronavirus and declared that China, not Taiwan, was the “best anti epidemic country in the world.”¹⁶² English-language tweets predominantly reported outbreak-related news, including through retweets of state media accounts and Chinese officials.

Implications

The ongoing coronavirus pandemic presents a significant reputational challenge for the CCP, both domestically as well as abroad. The full-spectrum influence capabilities deployed—overt state media, boosted posts, troll accounts, and more—shows that Beijing is willing to put all of its capabilities to work when it considers the stakes particularly high. This case study exemplifies China's significant reach in its international cross-platform, cross-media effort to promote its story.

Given the significant international attention on China's COVID-19 outbreak, the Chinese government has paid great attention to potentially unfavorable domestic narratives being broadcast outwards. Beijing has shown its unwillingness to tolerate this by aggressively silencing whistleblowers and suppressing independent media coverage to control domestic perception of the government's handling of the virus, and to limit international reporting on the emerging outbreak.

At the same time, Chinese state media has amassed an active presence on Twitter and marketed its presence on Facebook, enabling these properties to reach targeted audiences worldwide with content they would like to amplify. In addition to state media, Chinese diplomats have played an increasingly important role in the discourse on COVID-19, with some engaging in so-called “Wolf Warrior diplomacy” criticizing other countries' governments and promoting Beijing's pandemic response.

Along with overt activity through official state media and diplomat accounts, Beijing has further promoted its narrative through state-sponsored covert activity on Western social media platforms, praising the CCP response to the coronavirus pandemic and criticizing other actors. Much of the covert content was written in Chinese, which could indicate an intention to target the Chinese diaspora.

Chinese narratives on COVID-19 are consistent across overt and covert outlets, with both state media coverage and covert activity for the most part ignoring the outbreak at its start, then suddenly ramping up coverage and discussion from late January into February. Both overt and covert methods show a willingness to reframe old facts more conveniently, and to outright fabricate narratives. These similarities suggest at least some coordination between those responsible for media and social media communication on COVID-19; indeed, the government's COVID small group response team includes the CCP policy czar for ideology and propaganda and the director of the CCP Central Propaganda Department.¹⁶³



5. CHINA IN CONTEXT: A COMPARISON TO RUSSIAN INFORMATION OPERATIONS

China's evolving overt and covert influence capabilities, along with recent takedowns of attributed social media operations by Western social platforms, have begun to invite comparison to those of other state actors. Russia, Iran, and Saudi Arabia have all demonstrably leveraged attributable social media accounts for public diplomacy, as well as run fake accounts to manipulate global public opinion. Iranian and Saudi Arabian state media properties are not as far-reaching in terms of audience base, regionalization, and language, so comparisons to their full-spectrum propaganda capabilities remain slightly less relevant. Russia, however, has an extensive collection of white and grey propaganda properties, regionalized for global reach, in addition to its demonstrated commitment to social media manipulation strategies. This makes it a valuable counterpoint for understanding China's operations in context.

Despite having similar capabilities, the fundamental strategic objectives of Russia and China's information operations are significantly different. Russia's dual priorities include creating a positive perception in regions it prioritizes for economic and strategic relationships (Africa, Latin America, and the Middle East),¹⁶⁴ and "chipping away at the US-led international order."¹⁶⁵ It treats the information space as a constant battleground and coordinates long-term operations targeted at the civilian populations of geopolitical rivals. This doctrine, known as *hybrid warfare*, "breaks down the traditional binary delineation between war and peace" and emphasizes the importance of persuading civilian populations; hybrid warfare strategies are always underway, albeit fluctuating in intensity.¹⁶⁶ China, by contrast is focused on a strategic mission of establishing the country as a global hegemon in the international order and on the key objective of maintaining positive global opinion. It leverages a powerful, integrated set of economic, diplomatic, military, and ideological tools of persuasion.¹⁶⁷

Overt Capabilities

The differences between these core objectives influence the deployment of overt and covert capabilities that, on the surface, may look somewhat similar. On the overt, outward-facing media front, China has an expansive attributed global propaganda apparatus, with a budget exceeding \$10 billion, developed over half a century and fully integrated into the political and organizational frameworks of government.¹⁶⁸ The Kremlin's outward-facing overt propaganda apparatus is less expansive, and has a fraction of the budget.¹⁶⁹ While a variety of regional radio and television networks exist, there are two major outlets with international reach: Rossiya Segodnya (RS), which runs a range of channels, and RT (previously "Russia Today"). Although they are presented as separate entities, RT and Rossiya Segodnya are run by the same editor, Margarita Simonyan.¹⁷⁰ Simonyan has stated that the purpose of RT and Sputnik, a Russian news agency owned by Rossiya Segodnya, is to "secur[e] the national interests of the Russian Federation in the information sphere."¹⁷¹

A 2018 report by French think tanks Policy Planning Staff (CAPS) and Institute for Strategic Research (IRSEM) suggests that the original intended purpose of these two media entities was to improve the image of Russia abroad. However, the Kremlin realized that the properties were not terribly successful in this endeavor, and the mission of the outlets shifted: "they are now primarily used to degrade the image of the adversary."¹⁷² The content on RS and RT illustrates a commitment to ridiculing, deriding, and destabilizing geopolitical adversaries: in the language of the target audience, they amplify the reach of small fringe-party candidates and government

adversaries, and feature conspiracy theories and conspiratorial guests who rarely get airtime (framing their absence from home-country media as “censorship”).¹⁷³ The content amplifies protest movements and domestic unrest; some of RT’s subsidiaries have been observed to repurpose old content, or selectively edit footage of controversial events, to create the perception of a perpetual state of in-the-streets violence.

Both countries’ state media use Facebook Pages, YouTube channels, and other large platforms to reach social media audiences. Both have amassed significant audiences on these platforms: some of the English-language Chinese state media Facebook properties have over 80 million followers; CGTN has 105 million as of May 2020. RT’s main English-language Facebook Page is significantly smaller—it has 5 million followers (its Arabic and Spanish properties, the largest, each have 15 million). However, follower counts do not always translate to active, engaged audiences. Using CrowdTangle data spanning one year from June 2019 to June 2020, we observe an average interaction rate of .007% on China’s English language state media Pages, compared to .081% on Russia’s. On YouTube, the engagement is more proportional, though RT has wider reach. CGTN, China’s largest English-language state media YouTube channel, has 1.7 million subscribers and 1.1 billion views. RT’s main channel has 3.9 million subscribers and 3 billion views. RT overall, as it proudly notes in its channel banner, is the most-watched network on YouTube across its myriad channels.

On a narrative front, the majority of China’s state media content on its regionalized Facebook Pages and YouTube channels adheres to the CCP goal of presenting China in a positive light, while Russia’s state media social accounts maintain their primary focus on directly disparaging rivals. This is not particularly surprising, as they are largely sharing their own content on their Pages. However, one additional narrative dynamic worth describing, observed across both actors, is the use of smaller subsidiaries to spread stories that larger media properties ignore. RT has several subsidiaries, such as Ruptly, In The Now, and Redfish, declared in Foreign Agent Registration Act reports, though rarely acknowledged in any way on the sites or in their content. These are used to appeal to a younger demographic, producing pointed political video content aligned with left-leaning audiences. In China, the *Global Times* uses similar tactics, including citations to RT and fringe sites from the United States, to promote combative, populist positions at arm’s length from its parent publication, the *People’s Daily*, the official newspaper of the CCP. This segmentation dynamic merits further study.

Covert Capabilities

Similarly to the two countries’ overt tactics, the capabilities that Russia and China have each developed on the covert side of social media share some similarities but are behaviorally quite distinct. Both have leveraged domestic commenter activities, though the scale of China’s 50 Cent Party far exceeds anything in Russia. Both countries have demonstrated an expansion from domestic narrative management on social platforms to targeting global audiences using fake accounts. Russia’s online-manipulation operators at the Internet Research Agency (the IRA, a social media agency run by close Putin contact Evgeny Prigozin, kept distinct from state control for plausible-deniability purposes) were first put to use targeting local and regional spheres of influence. The IRA’s early work included posting comments on domestic message boards and spreading disinformation related to activities in Ukraine before expanding outward to target the United States, NATO countries, and other regions of strategic interest. Similarly to Russia, the CCP began its fake-persona activities with internally focused influence operations, then began to branch out to near-neighbors, diaspora communities, countries of strategic importance, and finally the broader global public.

	China	Russia
Internationally focused overt media presence	Extensive network of state-owned media properties, many with regionalized coverage in a wide range of languages	Two prominent properties, RT and Rossiya Segodnya, which own several subsidiaries and affiliates, and which operate in multiple languages and regions
Overt social media presence	State media presence on social media, such as Facebook Pages and YouTube channels; prominent diplomat and embassy Twitter accounts	State media presence on social media, such as Facebook Pages and YouTube channels; prominent diplomat and embassy Twitter accounts
Grey media properties and other media manipulation	Content farms with financial ties and relationship-based ties to the PRC	Network of purported think tanks and Kremlin-aligned micromedia sites that have been observed to run content from GRU personas that do not exist, as well as extensively repurposing state media narratives
Covert social media presence	50 Cent Party activity within domestic online communities and fake accounts on Twitter, Facebook, and YouTube; organizational structure of the entity managing these accounts remains unclear	Fake accounts on many Western platforms, some run by military intelligence (GRU), some run by third-party contractor organizations (Internet Research Agency and other entities affiliated with Yevgeny Prigozhin), others attributed to media managers for political parties
Examples of incidents or circumstances tied to full-spectrum information operations	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Harassment campaign targeting Guo Wengui • Hong Kong protests • Taiwan election 2018, 2020 • Emergence of COVID-19 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Downing of Malaysia Airlines flight MH-17 • Annexation of Crimea • U.S. election 2016, 2018 • Syrian War • Politically and economically motivated activity in eight African countries • United Russia-linked domestic political manipulation • Broad yet ineffectual activities targeting European countries surrounding incidents of geopolitical interest to Russia, known as “Secondary Infektion”

Table 3: Influence operation capabilities of China and Russia, respectively.

However, although there are similarities in the progression of targeted spheres of influence, there are notable differences in goals, strategy, and tactical execution. Russia’s goal to create chaos and erode adversary morale drives it to social media tactics that include high volume, multichannel information operations; repetitive narratives to exacerbate social divisions; no commitment to “objective reality”; and minimal commitment to consistency. RAND has termed this the “Firehose of Falsehood” model: the misleading information floods the zone, making it difficult for the target to ascertain the truth of a given situation.¹⁷⁴ Narratives contained within prominent attributed Russian operations, such as the IRA’s activities in the United States from 2015 to 2017, are rarely framed to bolster an adversary population’s perception of Russia itself. China, meanwhile, still largely confines itself to topics it considers critical to the reputation or interests of China, such as Hong Kong, the novel coronavirus, and Taiwan. Since the goal of its campaigns is primarily the creation of a favorable perception of China in the world, its covert account strategy would seem to necessitate a greater focus on persuasion—on crafting messaging to angle the perception of an event toward a pro-China framing.¹⁷⁵ There is some evidence that China is beginning to try some of the more adversarial messaging tactics that directly attack its rivals; the litany of narratives about COVID-19 and the social media sarcasm inherent in “Wolf Warrior diplomacy” (discussed in the case studies above) offers a glimpse of what this approach might look like from China.

Because they are focused on creating discord, Russian online influence operations target both sides of a domestic rift and work to exacerbate it.

There are demonstrable differences in their attention to account development and engagement, as well. Russia’s covert information operations on social media often involve sophisticated personas, developed over a period of years. They do ethnographic research (IRA operatives toured the United States)¹⁷⁶ and ingratiate themselves into the communities they are pretending to be members of (e.g., Black Lives Matter activists or Texas secessionists). They put in effort to build relationships with influencers, to ensure that authentic influential voices amplify their content (such as by mentioning and replying to high-profile accounts in hope of getting retweeted). If the accounts are unconvincing or the topic of a fake Page turns out to be a dud for the target audience, they pivot. The impact of this precise development and regular metric assessments is high engagement.

Many of the IRA’s fake Pages and accounts achieved significant engagement from their target community.¹⁷⁸ Additionally, because they are focused on creating discord, Russian online influence operations target *both* sides of a domestic rift and work to exacerbate it.

None of this is true of China’s attempts; in SIO’s own research we observe that its accounts acquire few, if any, real followers, have minimal amplification from authentic influencers, minimal audience segmentation, and tend to focus solely on the promotion of a pro-China narrative (occasionally attacking specific enemies, such as Guo Wengwei).¹⁷⁷ Chinese operators do not appear to have done the psychological or ethnographic research required to create convincing accounts on Western platforms. They additionally appear relatively unconcerned about getting no engagement. This is a common occurrence in PRC campaign-style mobilization: demonstrate to superiors total commitment by generating high levels of activity (in this case, hitting targets for post counts), while actual efficacy or impact may be secondary.

In one final comparison, we note that Russia has additionally leveraged network infiltration and cyber espionage in service to its information operations. The GRU—Russian military intelligence—has executed hacking operations, then leaked the obtained material to journalists in the targeted countries.¹⁷⁹ As evidence of the commitment to full-spectrum propaganda, RT and Sputnik, along with an array of Russia-aligned grey media properties, have reported on these hacks as well. In conjunction with its hacking activities, the GRU occasionally runs social media and media manipulation campaigns, creating fake personas who masquerade as journalists and submit state-created content to presumably unwitting, ideologically aligned media properties. We have not yet observed this type of direct aggression in service to information operations from China’s own hacking teams.



6. CONCLUSION

We set out to investigate the scope and nature of China's overt and covert capabilities, and how they complement one another. To do this, we examined both media and social media accounts, following the Pages, ads, and distribution of overt propaganda properties over time, in addition to undertaking deep analysis on the tactics, content, and behavior of exposed covert social media persona accounts following platform takedowns. We have aimed to contextualize these activities as evolving capabilities with ties to China's past competencies in narrative propaganda as well as agents of influence. In our case studies, we have described the deployment of a full spectrum of technologically enabled propaganda: overt, attributable state media; grey content farms; and covert social media persona accounts—a modern-day variant of the agent-of-influence strategies of decades past. These capabilities are leveraged to influence global public opinion about topics of concern to China, with a particular focus on presenting a positive image of China to the world. The CCP has repeatedly demonstrated its commitment to utilizing all of the operational capabilities at its disposal to influence narratives on matters of national importance; the most recent June 2020 Twitter takedown of yet more CCP-attributed covert social media accounts involved in spreading narratives about Taiwan, Hong Kong, and the coronavirus suggests that these behaviors will continue or increase.

This robust set of capabilities places China among a handful of other state actors with similar capabilities and commitment. However, unlike other actors, such as Russia, China has not used that influence in service to the same types of chaos-causing adversarial activity, or far-flung election manipulation. It is important to also note that, although the impact of influence operations remains difficult to quantify, China does not appear to be particularly successful at driving engagement or connecting with audiences; Russia, Iran, and others remain far more successful at generating engagement.

China's potential to refine and increase its capabilities, however, remains of significant concern to liberal democracies. We can expect it to learn, iterate, and adapt, availing itself of new avenues for coordinated information operations as they become available. Tactics honed in the intensely contested domains of Taiwan, Hong Kong, and the coronavirus are likely to be applied to other issues and regions of the world, where they may encounter less resistance and meet with greater success. Keeping abreast of this landscape is a critical step toward understanding it and ensuring our ability to detect and mitigate state-sponsored information operations as they continue to evolve.

The CCP has repeatedly demonstrated its commitment to utilizing all of the operational capabilities at its disposal to influence narratives on matters of national importance.



ENDNOTES

- 1 Formally, the People's Republic of China (PRC) is a multiparty state. However, the CCP exercises a monopoly of power through a Leninist hierarchy of Party organs that set policy, supervise its implementation, and control appointments at every level of the state bureaucracy. It is beyond the scope of this report to explore the complex relationships between Party and state in the PRC, as they can be fluid and difficult to disentangle. Nevertheless, the distinction matters in many contexts, and this report observes it.
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