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HOW CHINESE PROPAGANDA WORKS

GRIGOL JULUKHIDZE

213

EXPERT OPINION





საქართველოს სტრატეგიისა და საერთაშორისო ურთიერთობათა კვლევის ფონდი
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Introduction

China is becoming an ever more powerful player in the international political arena. Once a regional power, it now represents the main rival to US global dominance. Over the last few years, Beijing has actively started to apply “propagandistic methods” in order to increase its importance and demonize actual or potential foes. From this point of view, the visibility of the Chinese propaganda model is not as high in Georgia as, for example, the Russian. The main task of the below-presented expert opinion is to illustrate and analyze one of the most powerful machines of disinformation in the world and answer the question, “How does Chinese propaganda work?”

Techniques and Objectives of Chinese Propaganda

The main techniques of Chinese propaganda are disinformation abroad and ideological indoctrination or total control over information inside the country. In this regard, a few days ago, the US State Department alleged that China was investing billions of dollars to create a worldwide ecosystem that supports its ideology, all the while using “*deceptive and coercive methods*” to reshape the global information environment (U.S. Department of State, 2023). It appears that the Government of China is focusing its efforts on facilitating censorship and disseminating misinformation through strategies like acquiring ownership of foreign newspapers and television networks and applying pressure to international organizations and the media through the use of major social media platforms. The State Department’s historic report claims that these kinds of initiatives give Beijing the ability to sway the global information environment to its advantage, encouraging the spread of false or incomplete information to influence other governments into making decisions that put Beijing’s security and economic interests ahead of their own.

In this context, the Global Engagement Center describes how Beijing has developed strategies over the years to regulate and control the flow of crucial information, some of which are predicated on the dissemination of censorship and the fabrication or bias of comments. The Chinese Communist Party’s use of automated bot networks to attack foreign diplomats’ posts or to distribute its own ambassadors’ posts more widely is cited by the study as an example of such manipulative actions (Gazis, 2023).

Other tactics include employing state media employees as “*influencers*” on well-known social media sites to reach a worldwide audience, and purchasing telecom and satellite equipment to monitor and control content posted online.

Furthermore, 1,700 international news organizations receive free video material and television scripts from China Central Television, a state-run entity. Content from the PRC’s official media is frequently repackaged for local media without any branding to indicate that it originates from a foreign government. Beijing has also stepped up its influence operations on social media platforms in recent years. For example, state-run media outlets have formed editorial alliances with online and traditional media across the globe, sometimes even taking over entire venues.

The Communist Party’s propaganda is not very subtle or precise (China does not hold many elections, and tacitly supports Russia’s unprovoked invasion of Ukraine), but when directed at foreigners, the Chinese message is surprisingly effective, a new study by political scientists at Harvard, Yale, and the University of Groningen in the Netherlands suggests (The Economist, 2023). The authors surveyed about 6,000 citizens from 19 countries. The participants were divided into three groups. The first was shown Chinese propaganda, the second was shown messages from the US government, and the third was shown a little of both. Before and after the viewing, participants were asked about the economic and political models of the United States and China. **Support for the Chinese model increased substantially among those who watched the Chinese state media. At the end of the study, most people who saw those messages said they preferred China’s form of governance to that of the United States. American propaganda also had an impact, but less so. In the group that watched videos from both countries, people opted for China.**

The Chinese videos did not seem to convince people that the country is democratic, but they did reinforce the perception that the Communist Party offers growth, stability, and competent leadership. In an “era of democratic backsliding,” the public places great importance on these factors when evaluating political systems, the researchers say. The study was conducted before the recent wave of COVID-19 that killed hundreds of thousands of people in China.

According to estimates, President Xi Jinping gives his propagandists between \$7 billion and \$10 billion a year to “*tell China’s story well.*” Much of this effort corresponds to China Global Television Network (CGTN), the state media company behind the videos used in the study. It has dozens

of offices abroad that broadcast in five languages. The study showed that CGTN videos were especially persuasive among audiences in Africa and South America, two places where Chinese state media efforts are intensifying. According to annual polls by the British polling firm YouGov and the University of Cambridge, support for China is growing in countries such as Egypt, Kenya, Nigeria, and Mexico (Gan, 2023).

China’s precise goals altered during the Russo-Ukrainian war, but its overarching objective—weakening the US and the West as a whole—remains the same. Prior to and during the initial months of the Russian invasion, China mostly supported Russia’s actions because it wanted to bolster its own standing at the expense of the US. The war implied American involvement in Europe, which would cause the US to become less focused on the PRC, or at least more distracted from it. According to Chinese assessments, the Russian invasion was a swift operation, as Putin had believed. The purpose of the invasion was to gauge the extent to which the West would adhere to its own commitments and principles. China probably wanted—and still wants—to draw inferences from the way the war has played out and how the West has responded in order to better prepare for the next crisis in its region, which it recognizes as the US’s biggest remaining challenge. Additionally, China believed that the divides that have been exposed among Western nations would demonstrate their frailty and support its narrative about the West’s demise (Szcudlik and Legucka. 2023).

The content of Chinese propaganda and disinformation does not fully match the content of the Russian message. Topics such as the fight against Ukrainian Nazis and the need to denazify Ukraine are omitted, and Ukrainians are not blamed for crimes (e.g., in Bucha). The aim of disinformation and propaganda activities is to create the impression that China is distancing itself from Russia. The official discourse is shaped in such a way as to present the PRC as a neutral country and thus convince others that it can be cooperated with without any problems. When it comes to Ukraine, the Chinese authorities use terms such as “*Ukrainian issue*”, “*Ukrainian crisis*”, “*Ukrainian conflict*,” or “*Ukrainian dispute*” when referring to the invasion and war. There are no (or extremely few) cases of Ukraine being described as an entity. Chinese officials do not clearly and unambiguously express respect for Ukraine’s sovereignty, territorial integrity, and independence. Usually, when talking about the “*Ukrainian issue*”, Chinese leaders repeat that “*China advocates respecting and protecting the sovereignty and territorial integrity of all countries.*” This formulation suggests that China does not fully recognize Ukraine’s

statehood, and perceives it as a sphere of Russian influence (Szcudlik and Legucka. 2023).

The Use of Artificial Intelligence

In a September 2023 study, Microsoft highlighted that China's disinformation efforts also involved the use of artificial intelligence to produce "*engaging content that attracted resharing by recognized social media users of that content.*" Already in April 2023, the Beijing Academy of Artificial Intelligence (BAII), an institute affiliated with the government, was, according to what was stated by Microsoft president Bradford L. Smith, among the best in the world in the development of generative AI (Seldin, 2023).

What Smith claims is also reflected in a report from the RAND Corporation entitled "*The Rise of Generative AI and the Coming Era of Social Media Manipulation 3.0: Next-Generation Chinese Astroturfing and Coping with Ubiquitous AI*", which examines how Beijing could use generative artificial intelligence, along with next-generation language models like ChatGPT, to conduct its operations to increase its influence through information distortion (Marcellino et al., 2023).

However, the State Department report highlighted that significant Chinese investments to achieve the desired impact in both Asian and Western countries have encountered major resistance in the latter, especially from local media and civil society, leading, on this front, to mixed results for the PRC program.

On the contrary, in Asian countries, Chinese state media would find fertile ground, spreading their anti-NATO and pro-Kremlin propaganda "*in an amplified way*". For example, such media support Moscow's position that, as part of the current conflict in Ukraine, there were secret US-funded biological weapons facilities on Ukrainian territory.

The most important Chinese media entities are:

- Xinhua News Agency;
- Television network "China Global Television Network", which operates under China's central television entity CCTV;
- Radio station "China Radio International";
- The "China Daily Distribution Corporation" news agency;
- The distributor of People's Daily in the United States, Hai Tian Development USA;

- “China Central Television” television network;
- The news agency “China News Service”;
- The People’s Daily newspaper;
- The newspaper “The Global Times”.

The Great Firewall of China

The CCP’s control over the internet space and state-run media is just one component of Communist Party General Secretary Xi Jinping’s efforts to control China’s population and influence media narratives around the world. From banning certain words to strict censorship on the Internet and through China’s overseas tech companies, Xi has tightened the CCP’s grip on what people can say and hear about China.

In the case of China’s information policy, it is important to recognize that what we are looking at may be something completely different than what Chinese citizens see behind the stone or virtual Chinese wall. First of all, the fundamental goal of Chinese policy is to control information within China itself. While the attention of many observers may be drawn to, for example, Chinese activity on social networking sites available in Western countries, it is often forgotten that external entities have virtually no access beyond China’s virtual wall. This means very significant limitations in reaching Chinese recipients with content different from the messages dominant in their information environment - propaganda conditioned and controlled by the Communist Party of China. More than 50% of the PRC’s population has access to the Internet. Unlike Western countries, in China, it is subject to public control and censorship (like the entire Chinese media market), and popular Western social networking sites are unavailable without a VPN service. Back in 1998, the Chinese authorities implemented the Golden Shield Project, officially to increase public security. However, under Chinese law, the latter means blocking all content that is inconsistent with the official ideology and political line of the Communist Party of China. The most important consequence of the closure of China’s virtual space for Western social media is the market dominance of domestic alternatives (often copying Western solutions). The Chinese, having access to a wide portfolio of services within WeChat (approximately 1 billion users), QQ (over 800 million users), or Qzone (over 500 million users), including all functions available in media such as Facebook, Instagram, and X, extended to online payments and VoD services, are not even interested in Western social media. This has consequences not only in terms of business communication (in the sense of different channels of communication with

clients) and personal communication (maintaining contact with friends from the PRC often requires the use of Chinese software), but also in the field of information policy (Chłoń and Kozłowski, 2021).

China's global manipulation of information is not simply a matter of public diplomacy, but a challenge to the integrity of the global information space. More broadly, the PRC seeks to cultivate and sustain a global incentive structure that encourages foreign governments, civil society, and journalists to accept its master narratives and not criticize its conduct. In this context, given the premises on the widespread use of Chinese disinformation as a tool of sociopolitical interference, it is interesting to examine the role that, according to the American press, Beijing could have in view of the 2024 US presidential elections.

China, in fact, could have a significant—and often hidden—function in determining the print and digital content that civil society consumes in developing countries, thus amplifying Beijing's preferred narratives on issues such as Taiwan, and China's international economy. Access to global data, combined with the latest developments in artificial intelligence technology, would allow the PRC to timely target foreign audiences and thus likely influence economic and security decisions in its favor.

Assuming this scenario, this would constitute a direct challenge to all countries seeking to engage in relations with the PRC, due to fact-based assessments of their sovereign interests.

Similarities with the Russian Model of Propaganda

China is adapting the Kremlin's propaganda methods and tactics to its needs. Russia and China are trying to use every opportunity to increase their influence. One such activity is disinformation, which became even easier to create following on from 2020's COVID-19 pandemic. There are many goals, but the main ones are deepening polarization in society, generating chaos, spreading false information about the international situation, and lowering public trust in government, state, supranational, and intergovernmental institutions (such as NATO and the EU). Moreover, Russia and China are taking extensive steps to improve their own image in the international arena and divert attention from their activities, including political and military (Ukraine and Taiwan).

The first signs of this came in the first days of the Ukraine war. On February 22, two days before the invasion, a state broadcaster mistakenly published internal guidelines on Ukraine-related content, stating that "*unfavorable*

towards Russia” and “*pro-Western*” posts should not be published (Baptista, 2022). After that, the media and politicians quickly adopted the Kremlin’s sanitized language, referring to the events as a “special military operation,” and avoiding the use of the word “*invasion.*” Censorship also expanded to Chinese social platforms, where content and comments against Russia and Putin, along with those in favor of peace, simply began disappearing.

Reuters reports that a group of anti-war historians have had their posts deleted, as have two celebrities with millions of followers, Jin Xing and Ke Lan, suspended from Weibo (the equivalent of X) for expressing pacifist positions. At the same time, almost no type of censorship is applied to content in favor of war, Putin, and Russian propaganda lines, with the exception of the most violent and extremist content.

Meanwhile, the line expressed by the Chinese party-state broadcasters closely resembles that espoused by their Russian counterparts. The correspondences between the published titles and the positions expressed (as observed by the Doublethink Lab’s daily monitoring) are extraordinary. For example, the media of both countries have blamed NATO and Joe Biden’s America for having unleashed military intervention, forcing Russia to defend itself from Western expansionist aims (Szcudlik and Legucka, 2023). There is much more. A large-scale investigation by the German Marshall Fund shows how Chinese foreign broadcasters have widely spread Putin’s theses, according to which the Russian invasion is aimed at “*denazifying*” Ukraine, whose government is made up of “*neo-Nazis*”, “*drug addicts*” and “*corrupted individuals.*” Chinese diplomats prefer to avoid using the term “*Nazi*”, but via social media, they have amplified the arguments of other subjects along this line, linked to the anti-imperialist narratives that China uses to attack America (Brumby, 2022).

The use of disinformation as a tool to drive politics is nothing new, especially for a regime like China. This is where the monumental work “*The Art of War*” comes from, the last part of which Sun-Tzu completely devotes to the role of disinformation. The main danger in China’s disinformation is its anti-democratic nature. Beijing’s actions, even if not effective on the Western audience, still pose a threat to society as a whole, especially from the point of view of the discourse on democratic values. In the long term, this may contribute to the erosion of democratic institutions in individual Western countries and weaken the dynamics of cooperation based on democratic values. China’s double standards in the context of information flow (outside and inside) require a joint and multilateral response from states and organizations committed to democratic values.

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