

CYBERDEFENSE REPORT

Finding China's Edge

Engineering Influence Operations within the
Limits of Social Media Platform Rules

Jakob Bund

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Author: Jakob Bund

ETH-CSS project management: Myriam Dunn Cavelty, Deputy Head for Research and Teaching; Benjamin Scharte, Head of the Risk and Resilience Team; Andreas Wenger, Director of the CSS.

Editors: Sean Cordey and Benjamin Scharte
Copy-editing: Stefan Soesanto
Layout and graphics: Miriam Dahinden-Ganzoni

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Executive Summary

The proliferation of the coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) from the presumed ground zero in Wuhan has put China's crisis response to the test. Early on, this challenge has extended to China's communication capabilities, not just to inform and coordinate the international response on a global challenge but also to get China's story out.

Confronted with the rapid spread of the virus from Wuhan across China and the world, the leadership in Beijing has made a concerted endeavor to control and positively shape narratives about its reaction and international assistance following the outbreak, alongside efforts to highlight alleged shortcomings of other states.

Such attempts to influence international perceptions have drawn on the full spectrum of white, gray, and black propaganda tools. Specifically, China's messaging campaigns in the context of the coronavirus pandemic has sought to combine overt messaging through government press conferences and the growing presence of China's diplomats and state media apparatus on Western social media platforms with covert cyber-enabled operations designed to amplify, launder, and suppress information.

Among these techniques, the overt component stands out. The unusually open messaging through legitimate channels aims to redress the narrative control deficit often observed for digital influence operations and raises the stakes for a diplomatic response in the attempt to use heightened escalation risks to its advantage.

While promoting China's role in providing public goods, distracting from initial failure to contain the pandemic, fueling alternative narratives about the origin of the virus, emphasizing the failure of democratic pandemic crisis management, and telling the story of the successful Chinese containment strategy, China has attempted to entrench a distinction for its messaging from disinformation.

In a bid to strengthen perceptions of legitimacy of this messaging campaign, China has relied on official conduits, such as diplomats and state media. This official messaging has largely been framed to stay within the boundaries of platform rules, perceptively taking advantage carve-outs, to claim inaction by social media platforms as confirmation that China is abiding by the rules and as stamp of legitimacy for its narrative control efforts. Anchored within platform rules, the core messaging of China's influence operations has been promoted by dispensable amplification networks of

hijacked or fake social media accounts that can be reconstructed with comparative ease, when taken down by social media companies.

In addition to being under central direction, which aligns with CCP's preference for maintaining information control, diplomats and media organizations enjoy exemptions on social media due to their status as public figures or entities and producers of "newsworthy" content.

This differentiated treatment in the platform policies of Twitter and Facebook has emerged against the backdrop of populist politicians in democracies that challenged platform rules while attracting significant engagement through polarization and provocation but also legitimate public interest about their views and positions.

In evaluating China's attempts at shaping narratives, this report emphasizes that any assessment of the impact of China's influence operations needs to pay particular attention to the more subtle implications that might be more impactful and harder to detect in the short-term. The apparent endeavor to exert control over narratives represents only one of several objectives, some of which threaten to be of more important long-term consequence than the immediate effort to exert influence itself.

Impact assessments need to carefully look beyond the primary objective of narrative control. Indeed, narrative control might be the most obvious but least influential aspect. For all their openness, other strategically advantageous effects of China's influence operations might require more subtle analysis going forward. Among these, delays in effects, continued capability refinement, signaling intentions, dangers of distraction, and unintended consequences value particular attention and are explored in detail in this report.

To arrive at a careful evaluation of impact, this report concentrates on how the tactics of China's influence operations have evolved during the first year of the pandemic. Looking at China's key priority of information control, the first section conceptualizes the adaptation of influence operations to align with this preference while taking advantage of the global reach of social media. Building on this understanding, section two explores the ways in which Chinese influence operations have attempted to systematically exploit carve-outs that have emerged from how social media have regulated official statements and newsworthy content. Section three analyzes in more detail the integrated messaging apparatus China has sought to develop, in particular in respect of the specific roles that China's diplomatic network, state media, and fake social media accounts play in creating, shaping, and promoting narratives. Unpacking China's attempts to distinguish its endeavor of narrative control from disinformation campaigns,

section four examines China's responses to accusations of disinformation and steps taken by social media companies and by targeted states to address this specific tactic. The report concludes with evaluating the potential implications of China's influence operations in terms of their immediate objective to shape international perceptions of China's actions during the pandemic and raises attention about the capabilities developed in this process and their potential deployment in case of a further deterioration of relations with China.

China's recourse to influence operations during the pandemic has evoked comparisons with Russia, with many commenters suggesting that China had drawn on Russia's tactics in sowing doubt. As this study finds, China's operations have focused on emphasizing China's successes and disparaging geopolitical rivals rather than seeking to directly exacerbate divisions. In this endeavor, China has sought to ground the center of gravity of its operations within the limits of platform rules and entrench a distinction between its own efforts at narrative control and a "common evil" of disinformation, for which it stresses its own victimhood. The semblance of legitimacy drawn from operating within the boundaries of platform rules might make China's playbook of wider appeal.

Introduction

The outbreak of the coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) in Wuhan has created both pressures and opportunities for Beijing to present itself as a responsible stakeholder and provider of global public goods. The global health crisis emerging from China has also thrown the country's leadership into a political emergency.

Against this backdrop, China has made a concerted endeavor to control the narratives about its own domestic crisis response and create an image as a reliable international partner, with particular interest in highlighting alleged shortcomings in efforts undertaken by the United States. Notable for China's influence campaigns in the context of the coronavirus pandemic is the combination of overt messaging – through government press conferences and China's diplomatic network and state media apparatus – with covert cyber-enabled operations designed to amplify, launder, and suppress information. Through this fusion, these techniques seek to eschew disinformation labels and make possible effects more difficult to diffuse. The unusually open messaging through legitimate channels aims to redress the narrative control deficit often observed for digital influence operations and raises the stakes for a diplomatic response in the attempt to use heightened escalation risks to its advantage. In seeking to control international perceptions of its crisis response, China's influence efforts threaten to cause direct and collateral damage to the ability of governments in Europe and the United States to effectively communicate time-sensitive information to their populations. In the context of a major health crisis, effects undermining popular trust in governments carry additional weight inasmuch as they distance select social groups from public advice and emergency health measures. Moreover, these adversarial efforts, hold significant potential to drive transatlantic partners further apart on their China policies and undermine their abilities to communicate critical information to their own populations at home.

Analyzing the respective roles of Chinese diplomats, state-controlled media, and bot networks, this report assesses the implications of Beijing's influence overture beyond their immediate and transparent focus on shaping international perceptions of China's behavior, to inform the design of

comprehensive and targeted countermeasures. Central to this assessment is the question as to how China has entrenched its messaging on social media and in US and European news reports, considering that many of its state-directed components have been openly visible. By taking advantage of exceptions on Facebook and Twitter created around public diplomacy and newsworthiness – that were designed to enhance the inclusiveness of discourse and the free flow of information – China's coordinated narratives have achieved a notable persistence in their outreach to audiences overseas.

With issues related to the early containment of the coronavirus unresolved, questions of responsibility have not subsided. China alongside other countries has undertaken significant efforts to demonstrate its capabilities as provider of public goods and its own good will to use its industrial capabilities and medical expertise in aid of the broader international community. These steps have been suspected to be a combination of a genuine endeavor to provide relief and a campaign to actively shape perceptions of China following allegations of obstructed information sharing in early 2020 about the existence, extent, and speed of the outbreak that likely would have enabled other countries to prepare better. Addressing these conditions, Josep Borrell, the EU's High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy and Vice-President of the European Commission (HR/VP), has warned of a "global battle of narratives," in which "China is aggressively pushing the message that, unlike the US, it is a responsible and reliable partner."¹

Faced with questions both domestically and internationally about its performance in containing the outbreak, Beijing has taken wide-ranging measures to shore up confidence in its ability to rise to the challenge. Authorities ordered the lockdown of more than 60 million people across Hubei province – a move then unprecedented in public health history, according to WHO officials² – in an effort to cordon off the source of the outbreak. China has made high-quality protective gear from state-controlled manufacturers available to other countries³ and even received commendation from the WHO for sending Chinese medical staff and equipment overseas at times of domestic need.⁴

At the same time, exerting control over the narrative around China's crisis management constituted an integral component of China's crisis management response itself. In an early indication of the importance assigned to information and narrative control, authorities had silenced several Chinese medical

¹ European External Action Service, "EU HRVP Josep Borrell: The Coronavirus pandemic and the new world it is creating," 24.03.2020. https://eeas.europa.eu/delegations/china/76401/eu-hrvp-josep-borrell-coronavirus-pandemic-and-new-world-it-creating_en

² Reuters, "Wuhan lockdown 'unprecedented', shows commitment to contain virus: WHO representative in China," 23.01.2020. <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-china-health-who-idUSKBN1ZM1G9>

³ Bojan Pancevski, "As Countries Vie for Coronavirus Supplies, Germany Cuts Deal With China," *Wall Street Journal*, 08.04.2020. <https://www.wsj.com/articles/as-countries-vie-for-coronavirus-supplies-germany-cuts-deal-with-china-11586372608>

⁴ Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus, Speech by the WHO Director-General at the Munich Security Conference, 15 February 2020. <https://www.who.int/dg/speeches/detail/munich-security-conference>

professionals that came forward to warn about the potential scope and severity of a COVID-19 outbreak. In the early days of handling the outbreak, two out of nine members of the Leading Small Group⁵ for Countering the Coronavirus Epidemic alone were responsible for propaganda portfolios.⁶

Analyzing China's influence efforts through the lens of narrative control, this report cuts through questions of factual accuracy and seeks to focus on the longer-term interests and priorities that shape Beijing's messaging. Building on the existing body of analysis that has advanced the visibility of the growing presence of Chinese propaganda elements on Western social media platforms, this report looks at the tactical evolutions in the use of social media to further the understanding of what capability developments may persevere beyond the pandemic.

With respect to the observed heavy- and ham-handedness of China's influence efforts, it is worth noting that these assessments by their nature reflect perspectives of seasoned political analysts. Chinese linguist Liz Carter submits that "[t]he point is not to convince everyone, but to convince enough people to win a public opinion war and drown out voices of reason." Keeping this aspect of the CCP's strategy in view is critical to understand the effect of the party's influence overture because, as Carter affirms, "those who know enough to care about it are the least likely to be affected by it, and the most likely to underestimate its harmful impact."

To arrive at a careful evaluation of impact vectors, this report concentrates on how the tactics of China's influence operations have evolved during the first year of the pandemic. Looking at China's key priority of information control, the first section conceptualizes the adaptation of influence operations to align with this preference of control while taking advantage of the global reach of social media. Building on this understanding, section two explores the ways in which Chinese influence operations have attempted to systematically exploit carve-outs that have emerged from how social media platforms have regulated statements from political figures and newsworthy content. Section three analyzes in more detail the

integrated messaging apparatus China has sought to develop, in particular with respect to the specific roles that China's diplomatic network, state media, and fake social media accounts play in creating, shaping, and promoting narratives. Unpacking China's attempts to distinguish its endeavor of narrative control from disinformation campaigns, section four examines China's responses to accusations of disinformation and steps taken by social media companies and by targeted states to address this specific tactic. The report concludes with evaluating the potential implications of China's influence operations in terms of their immediate objective to shape international perceptions of China's actions during the pandemic and raises attention about the capabilities developed in this process and their potential deployment in case of a further deterioration of relations with China.

With the exception of select high-level developments, including the Oversight Board's ruling on the suspension of Donald Trump from Facebook's platforms and the G7 and EU-US summits that took place in June 2021, the research presented in this report reflects the state of knowledge and events up until 31 March 2021. This study does not address in depth the evolution in the assessment that a laboratory accident in China could potentially be the origin of the coronavirus, including US President Biden's public announcement on 26 May that he had tasked the intelligence community to further investigate the scenario of a lab leak.⁷

1 Active Control

1.1 Regaining Control in the Digital Realm

The COVID-19 outbreak in Wuhan has placed the Chinese government at the epicenter of a global health emergency, while remaining locked into a resurging great power competition with the United States and EU perceptions of being a "systemic rival"⁸.

Embedded in this geopolitical context, Beijing's response to the unfolding health crisis has heavily relied

⁵ Leading Small Groups (领导小组) (LSGs) develop overarching policy guidelines to steer bureaucratic activity. Typically comprised of members of the Politburo or the Central Committee of the Party, LSGs carry considerable weight in the policymaking process as their decisions commonly reflect a consensus among the leading representatives across key government, party, and military functions.

⁶ John Dotson, "The CCP's New Leading Small Group for Countering the Coronavirus Epidemic—and the Mysterious Absence of Xi Jinping," *China Brief* 20:3 (2020), Jamestown Foundation. <https://jamestown.org/program/the-ccps-new-leading-small-group-for-countering-the-coronavirus-epidemic-and-the-mysterious-absence-of-xi-jinping/>

⁷ White House, "Statement by President Joe Biden on the Investigation into the Origins of COVID-19," 26.05.2021. <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2021/05/26/statement-by-president-joe-biden-on-the-investigation-into-the-origins-of-covid-19/>

⁸ European Commission / High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, "EU-China – A Strategic Outlook," *Joint Communication to the European Parliament, the European Council and the Council JOIN/2019/5 final*, 12.03.2019. <https://ec.europa.eu/info/sites/info/files/communication-eu-china-a-strategic-outlook.pdf>

on active efforts to shape international perceptions, strongly emphasizing the importance of controlling and coordinating its external messaging. In contrast to information operations that have confusion and polarization as their overarching objective, China's influence efforts in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic have concentrated on narrative control and are distinguished by close state direction and the involvement of China's diplomatic network and state media.

On the surface, the dominant state direction might make it easier to detect China's operations. Through its coordination, however, China's messaging shows signs of persistence and consistency that act as force multipliers and through the use of official channels is afforded the cover of perceived legitimacy. These aspects remain less well understood in their long-term effects.

In this vein, China's narrative control operations demonstrate elements characteristic for the information control techniques and the targeted use of disinformation to shape positive perceptions that have previously been deployed domestically in China to assert the Communist Party's discourse power. China's adaptation of these techniques constitutes a notably different brand of information operations that aims to mitigate a central shortcoming of cyber-enabled influence operations from the perspective of the CCP's preference of information and narrative control. As the political scientist Thomas Rid observed, using a Cold War term for influence operations, the digital transformation and rise of online activism have made "active measures cheaper, quicker, more reactive and less risky". At the same time, these developments have also "made active measures more active and less measured," harder to control and more difficult to assess in their impact.⁹ The approach that China has pursued during the pandemic seeks to address this critical realization.

This effort at active control of narratives makes influence attempts easier to detect but harder to defuse as it relies on legitimate channels. At the onset of the pandemic, China's assertive messaging caught Europe in an immediate need of medical equipment, accentuating a deep-running supply dependency on China, that together with the prospect of a "dire economic situation [have] limit[ed] the scope of shifts in its China policy".¹⁰

Circumventing questions of how effective trolling campaigns have been in translating online interactions into actual influence over political attitudes and

behavior, China has attempted to broaden its outreach beyond fake and hijacked social media accounts that have routinely served as fronts for foreign influence attempts. The polarizing bent necessary for posts from these previously nondescript accounts to gain traction are often a liability and have limited engagement to already like-minded groups.¹¹ In an attempt to cut the seeding phase for its narratives short and facilitate a more rapid pick-up in mainstream media reporting, China has relied on legitimate channels to spread its messages.

In choosing this path, China has striven to accelerate the amplification of its narratives at the expense of covertness, seeking mainstream access in a blunt attempt that appeared ill-designed to win over hearts and minds because of its apparent link to China's propaganda machine. The messenger tainted the message. Yet, this dynamic has proven to not be unalterable. If the message becomes powerful enough, it may overcome suspicions of propaganda that otherwise would reflexively discount its validity.

In this respect, hack-and-leak operations that promote illegally obtained material in the past have provided factual fragments for propaganda narratives to exploit to increase their credibility, either by directly leveraging potentially harmful content discovered in confidential information or by using a cache of authentic documents as veneer for forgeries devised to blend in with the pilfered files. No public reports have emerged to date of China engaging in this practice. Any break from this pattern would mark a stark escalation unlikely to occur absent a significant further deterioration in the relationship between China and any state targeted in such a way.

Mainstream media organizations in a variety of ways have prominently, though inadvertently, enabled disinformation campaigns,¹² most notably Russian efforts in the run-up to the US elections in 2016. Prioritizing the public interest to know, a number of news outlets have acted as amplifiers for state-crafted narratives free of charge by centering their reporting on polarizing political claims irrespective of their authorship or proven authenticity. Absent proper caveats about what is and what is not known about the authorship and authenticity of such claims at the time of reporting and the possible illicit provenance of any leaked material that a news story might address, such reporting risks upstaging the motivations of the influence operation runners and abetting the influence objective itself.

⁹ Thomas Rid, *Active Measures: The Secret History of Disinformation and Political Warfare* (Farrar Strauss & Giroux: New York, 2020), 12.

¹⁰ Andrew Small, "The meaning of systemic rivalry: Europe and China beyond the pandemic," *European Council on Foreign Relations*, 13.05.2020.

https://ecfr.eu/publication/the_meaning_of_systemic_rivalry_europe_and_china_beyond_the_pandemic/

¹¹ Christopher A. Bail et al., "Assessing the Russian Internet Research Agency's impact on the political attitudes and behaviors of American Twitter users in late 2017," *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences of the United States of America* 117:1 (2020). <https://doi.org/10.1073/pnas.1906420116>

¹² Aric Toler, "How (Not) To Report On Russian Disinformation," *Bellingcat*, 15.04.2020. <https://www.bellingcat.com/resources/how-tos/2020/04/15/how-not-to-report-on-russian-disinformation/>

Messaging campaigns from China's diplomats throughout the pandemic have attempted to freeride media coverage by the same logic, while shifting to communications from official sources in a bid to claim legitimacy of reporting on China's side of the story. Emphasizing messaging through official channels, has allowed China to sidestep any reluctance of media outlets after the experience in 2016 of Russian trolls instigating rallies to pick up narratives from apparent activists for fear they could be foreign fronts. Instead, China's narrative overture has aimed to provide ready-to-run sound bites to take advantage of journalistic guidelines for fair and balanced reporting that might prime news publications to look out for contrasting positions or, indeed, of legal obligations for due impartiality, as codified in the case of broadcasting services in the UK.¹³

Whereas China and Russia both employ influence operations as a low-cost tool to advance their strategic interests, the specific nature of their overarching interests differ markedly and need to be reflected in any resulting threat assessments. Paul Nakasone, the head of US Cyber Command and director of the National Security Agency, and Michael Sulmeyer, a senior advisor to Nakasone, in August 2020 rooted the leading cyber defense concerns with respect to China in espionage against research into COVID-19 vaccines and influence operations intended to buttress China's international image.¹⁴ Russia, by contrast, they assessed, engaged in cyber-enabled espionage and theft for disruptive purposes, including against infrastructure systems. Crucially, some of these efforts directly aimed to undermine the integrity of elections or confidence in their results.

One hundred days ahead of the 2020 elections, a statement by the director of the US National Counterintelligence and Security Center, William Evanina, reiterated these trends for Russian and Chinese operations, yet subsumed the Chinese activities under the heading of election threats, conflating, at least at the surface, the strategic objectives that set both adversaries apart.¹⁵ Only in the substance of the statement does this distinction become clear. The press release describes Russia's continued spread of disinformation as directly "designed to undermine confidence in [the US] democratic process", whereas China's influence efforts seek to "pressure political

figures it views as opposed to China's interests, and counter criticism".¹⁶ This assessment closes with the significant qualification that "Beijing recognizes its efforts might affect the presidential race" – a judgment that classifies election interference as a collateral of China's influence operations.¹⁷

Independent of the motivation and effectiveness of China's operations, this evolution in tactics to reassert control over the narrative of influence operations through coordinated messaging by officials has the potential for long-term effects on China's international standing beyond the present coronavirus crisis.

1.2 Strategic Drivers and Themes of China's Influence Operations

The CCP's continued investment in assertive messaging despite internal voices that warned of a potential backlash reflects the high stakes attributed to managing international perceptions following the CCP's laggard recognition and international communication about the scope of the outbreak in Wuhan. The set of strategic drivers spurring the CCP's interest in influence operations, however, is significantly wider and includes factors that predate the pandemic and were reinforced by the global health crisis.

An intelligence report of the US Department of Homeland Security intelligence report from May 2020 concludes China understated the severity of the outbreak in January, while seizing its information advantage to stock up face masks, surgical gowns and gloves on global markets.¹⁸ Initial attempts at downplaying the crisis to assert leadership domestically and incomplete reporting on early infection events also secured China a crucial window for buying up medical supplies ahead of an expected global shortage.

Faced with questions and allegations about failures in slowing down the spread of the coronavirus, official messaging shifted to insisting that authorities reacted decisively to the emerging crisis and bore no responsibility for the speed at which the virus spread internationally. Criticism of delayed notifications about the virus' rapid contagion met with a messaging campaign to positively "correct" China's image internationally. As Reuters exclusively reported, the Ministry of State Security (MSS) warned senior Chinese

¹³ Office of Communications of the UK, "Section five: Due impartiality and due accuracy," *Ofcom Broadcasting Code*, 31.12.2020. <https://www.ofcom.org.uk/tv-radio-and-on-demand/broadcast-codes/broadcast-code/section-five-due-impartiality-accuracy>

¹⁴ Paul M. Nakasone / Michael Sulmeyer, "How to Compete in Cyberspace: Cyber Command's New Approach," *Foreign Affairs*, 25.08.2020. <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/united-states/2020-08-25/cybersecurity>

¹⁵ Office of the Director of national Intelligence, "Statement by NCSC Director William Evanina: 100 Days Until Election 2020," 24.07.2020.

<https://www.odni.gov/index.php/newsroom/press-releases/press-releases-2020/item/2135-statement-by-ncsc-director-william-evanina-100-days-until-election-2020>

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁸ Will Weissert, "DHS report: China hid virus' severity to hoard supplies," *Associated Press*, 04.05.2020. <https://apnews.com/bf685dcf52125be54e030834ab7062a8>

leaders in April, including President Xi Jinping, about rising global anti-Chinese sentiment.¹⁹ The underlying report by the China Institutes of Contemporary International Relations (CICIR), a state-run think tank associated with the MSS that also coordinates the Chinese end of many track-2 diplomacy initiatives, put the level of discontent with China at its highest since the crackdown on protestors at Tiananmen Square in 1989. Intensive coverage by both Chinese state media and diplomatic social media accounts of Chinese medical supplies shipments to the US and European countries has taken place against the backdrop of this warning.

By combining an official image campaign with practical assistance, this dual attempt has sought to both cultivate and fabricate, or at least expedite the development of, international goodwill. Presenting China as a provider of global public goods, official messaging during this period undertook continued efforts to portray a picture of China as responsible stakeholder. In this vein, the messaging campaign has been part of a remote bid to gain on the traditional soft power advantage that the US and countries across Europe hold over China.

Public diplomacy pushes and state media reporting have highlighted China's efforts to aid other countries in a time of shortage of medical staff and supplies at home. Emphasizing China's contributions in curbing the outbreak and stabilizing the global economy, official messaging has sought to invoke international recognitions of China's actions in its support. One such notable example include remarks by the director general of the World Health Organization acknowledging that "China has taken to contain the outbreak at its source appear to have bought the world time, even though those steps have come at greater cost to China itself."²⁰ As access and distribution challenges shifted from protective equipment to vaccines, Beijing's messaging has followed suit. According to a statement by China's Foreign Minister and State Councilor Wang Yi at a press conference on 7 March 2021, 17 vaccines developed in China have entered clinical trials and more than 60 countries have approved vaccines from China.²¹ In October 2020, China joined the vaccine access coalition COVAX, set up by the WHO, European

Commission and France, with the commitment to provide 10 million doses to developing countries. Based on Wang's claim, China has or is in the process of donating coronavirus vaccines to 69 developing countries and is exporting vaccines to an additional 43 countries. Wang grounded this assistance in the "hope that Chinese vaccines will inject more confidence and hope into the global fight against the virus." By the end of July 2021, China had donated 33 million vaccine doses, according to the Beijing-based joint venture Bridge Consulting.²² More than 70 per cent of donations were shipped to countries in the Asia-Pacific region. By contrast, an internal document prepared by the European Commission and first reported on by Reuters showed that, as of 13 July 2021, the bloc had delivered less than four million²³ of the 200 million it has committed to share with low and middle-income countries by the end of 2021.²⁴

These efforts appear to form part of a genuine attempt to strengthen China's soft power influence, or at least to offset the influence of traditional providers of global public goods. These positive self-projections, however, are mixed in with endeavors to bolster China's reputation by pointing to alleged shortcomings of traditional providers of global public goods, in particular the United States. To sharpen this contrast, Chinese diplomats have repeatedly tried to covertly extract praise for China's crisis response and emergency assistance from foreign governments.

For similar reasons, China's state media has enlisted foreign commentators to improve the credibility of its coverage with non-Chinese-speaking audiences overseas. *China Daily*, the CCP's English-language newspaper, and CGTN, China's international television network – which is controlled by the CCP's Publicity Department – ran an op-ed by John Ross, a former economic advisor to the mayor of London, that linked anti-Chinese sentiments to an alleged lack of preparedness in the West. According to Ross, "the bitter truth is that the anti-China propaganda campaign has to some extent contributed to the West being negligent to the looming crisis and they are now facing a medical, human and economic disaster."²⁵ Reflecting this relative

¹⁹ Reuters, "Exclusive: Internal Chinese report warns Beijing faces Tiananmen-like global backlash over virus," 04.05.2020. <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-health-coronavirus-china-sentiment-ex/exclusive-internal-chinese-report-warns-beijing-faces-tiananmen-like-global-backlash-over-virus-idUSKBN22G19C>

²⁰ Tedros, Speech at the Munich Security Conference. <https://www.who.int/dg/speeches/detail/munich-security-conference>

²¹ Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China (PRC), "State Councilor and Foreign Minister Wang Yi Meets the Press," 08.03.2021. https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/wjb_663304/wjbz_663308/2461_663310/t1859138.shtml

²² Bridge Consulting, China COVID-19 Vaccine Tracker, accessed on 31 July 2021. <https://bridgebeijing.com/our-publications/our-publications-1/china-covid-19-vaccines-tracker/>

²³ Francesco Guarascio, "EU has shipped tiny percentage of planned COVID-19 shot donations - document," *Reuters*, 22 July 2021. <https://www.reuters.com/business/healthcare-pharmaceuticals/eu-has-shipped-tiny-percentage-planned-covid-19-shot-donations-document-2021-07-22/>

²⁴ European Commission, "Vaccinating the world: 'Team Europe' to share more than 200 million doses of COVID-19 vaccines with low and middle-income countries by the end of 2021," 22 July 2021. https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/IP_21_3845

²⁵ John Ross, "Coronavirus – anti-China propaganda brings catastrophe to the West," *China Daily*, 16.03.2020.

approach in China's messaging, the head of the Global Engagement Center at the US State Department, Lea Gabrielle, observed that China's communications and news reporting featured "increasingly vocal criticism of how democratic countries were responding to the crisis".²⁶

All these different streams of China's influence efforts share the perceived need from China's perspective to control the narrative framing the theme.

1.3 "The Main Front": China's Growing Presence on Western Social Media

A longitudinal review by the Programme on Democracy & Technology²⁷ at the University of Oxford shows that state interest in social media as extension of political influence does not simply flare up in response to specific events or contingencies, such as elections or health emergencies, but forms part of a continuous, growing trend to expand instruments of statecraft. Interest in related tactics and tools, as well as their development, are not inherently linked to the coronavirus pandemic or limited to authoritarian states. In its 2020 Global Inventory of Organized Social Media Manipulation, the Programme on Democracy & Technology evaluates that 81 countries are actively pursuing social media manipulation campaigns,²⁸ a marked increase from 48 countries in 2018 and 28 countries in 2017.²⁹ As the inventory only records publicly reported cases and draws on news coverage, aspects of this growth will likely also be driven by the increased journalistic attention on state-led influence campaigns. An earlier report for 2019, highlighted strong top-level, government-driven elements for China and Russia compared to other countries. Only five other countries³⁰

among the 70 countries that the Computational Propaganda Research Project tracked as engaged in organized social media manipulation in 2019 exhibited a similarly strong involvement of government institutions.³¹ For 2020, the researchers no longer include qualifying distinctions for the degree of state direction and instead assess that government agencies across 64 of the 81 reviewed countries to some level have engaged in social media manipulation.³²

Ahead of HR/VP Borrell's warnings of a "battle of narratives" and before the global spread of the coronavirus, Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi at the annual Symposium on the International Situation and China's Foreign Relations in December 2019 looked back on 2019 as "a year of growing chaos and rising challenges for the world" (《2019年，对世界而言，是乱象丛生、挑战上升的一年》).³³ Wang noted that "[i]n this context, great power games are clearly intensifying" (《在这样的背景下，大国博弈明显升温》).³⁴

The nature of China's diplomatic overture during the pandemic is closely intertwined with ideological tenets developed under Xi Jinping. In a speech at the opening of the *Xi Jinping Thought on Diplomacy Research Center* in July 2020, Wang contrasted Xi Jinping Thought on Diplomacy with "traditional theories [that] are increasingly unable to explain the contemporary world".³⁵ In this distinction, Wang claimed, Xi Jinping Thought on Diplomacy "rises above national and regional parochialism, transcends the traditional realist theory of international relations, and takes the moral high ground by focusing on the progress of humanity."³⁶ Addressing current and retired Chinese diplomats, Wang aligned the group to "take fundamental guidance from Xi Jinping Thought on Diplomacy for all our work, stay focused amid the turbulence [resulting from the coronavirus pandemic] and seize opportunities from the

<https://www.chinadaily.com.cn/a/202003/16/WS5e6ef7cfa31012821727f64a.html>

²⁶ Betsy Woodruff Swan, "State report: Russian, Chinese and Iranian disinformation narratives echo one another," *Politico*, 21.04.2020. <https://www.politico.com/news/2020/04/21/russia-china-iran-disinformation-coronavirus-state-department-193107>

²⁷ The reports cited here were published under the research group's previous name, the Computational Propaganda Research Project.

²⁸ Samantha Bradshaw / Hannah Bailey / Philip N. Howard, "Industrialized Disinformation: 2020 Global Inventory of Organized Social Media Manipulation," *Computational Propaganda Research Project, University of Oxford*, January 2021, 1. <https://comprop.oii.ox.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/sites/127/2021/01/CyberTroop-Report20-FINALv.3.pdf>

²⁹ Samantha Bradshaw / Philip N. Howard, "The Global Disinformation Order: 2019 Global Inventory of Organized Social Media Manipulation," *Computational Propaganda Research Project, University of Oxford*, September 2019, 2. <https://comprop.oii.ox.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/sites/93/2019/09/CyberTroop-Report19.pdf>

³⁰ These countries are Cambodia, Iran, Israel, the United Arab Emirates, and the US.

³¹ Bradshaw / Howard, "2019 Global Inventory of Organized Social Media Manipulation," 10. <https://comprop.oii.ox.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/sites/93/2019/09/CyberTroop-Report19.pdf>

³² Bradshaw / Bailey / Howard, "2020 Global Inventory of Organized Social Media Manipulation," 10. <https://comprop.oii.ox.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/sites/127/2021/01/CyberTroop-Report20-FINALv.3.pdf>

³³ Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the PRC, 乘风破浪·坚定前行, Speech by State Councilor and Minister of Foreign Affairs Wang Yi at the opening ceremony of the 2019 Symposium on the International Situation and China's Foreign Relations, Beijing, 13 December 2019 <https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/web/wjbzhd/t1724297.shtml>

³⁴ *Ibid.*

³⁵ Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the PRC, *Study and Implement Xi Jinping Thought on Diplomacy Conscientiously and Break New Ground in Major-Country Diplomacy with Chinese Characteristics*, Speech by State Councilor and Minister of Foreign Affairs Wang Yi at the Inauguration Ceremony of the Xi Jinping Thought on Diplomacy Studies Centre, Beijing, 20 July 2020. https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/zxxx_662805/t1799305.shtml

³⁶ *Ibid.*

changes in order to usher in a new stage of major-country diplomacy with Chinese characteristics".³⁷

This call on China's diplomatic corps echoes one of the ten principles expounded by Xi's guidance, to "[n]urture a distinctive style of Chinese diplomacy by combining the fine tradition of external work and the characteristics of times".³⁸ Nominally centered around promoting a "community with shared future for mankind" (《人类命运共同体》), opening the research center amid rising tensions and against the backdrop of China's emphasis of narrative control in its diplomatic outreach gives this exhortation of adaptation to "the characteristics of times" a distinctively different and assertive connotation.

Highlighting the opportunities that digital interconnectedness offers to the reach of propaganda, Xi noted at a visit to the *People's Liberation Army Daily* in 2015 that, "the Internet in particular is driving a transformation in the media sector such as we have never before seen."³⁹ Xi further underscored the rationale for branching out to international audiences, declaring that, "wherever the readers are, wherever the viewers are, that is where propaganda reports must extend their tentacles, and that is where we find the focal point and end point of propaganda and ideology work."⁴⁰

Applying this official high-level guidance to the coronavirus crisis, a commentary from the China Journalist Association in the *People's Daily* – China's largest newspaper published by the Central Committee of the CCP – identified "the international public opinion field dominated by overseas social media" as the main front of propaganda aimed at foreign audiences (《对外宣传的主阵地·是在以海外社交媒体为主的国际舆论场》).⁴¹

Chinese diplomats embarked on a systematic effort to seize these platforms and to increase China's international discourse power following the mass protests in Hong Kong in 2019. The demonstrations initially erupted in opposition to proposed changes to extradition procedures that would have exposed people in Hong Kong to prosecution in mainland China.

The Hamilton 2.0 dashboard maintained by the Alliance for Securing Democracy (ASD) at the German Marshall Fund, registered a tremendous uptick in the number of Twitter accounts linked to individuals or entities affiliated with the Chinese government in excess of 460 per cent, from around 30 accounts in early 2019 to 170 in February 2021.⁴² More than 35 per cent of these accounts were set up in 2020. For accounts operated by Chinese diplomats that were tracked in the period from March to September 2020, the follower count roughly doubled during this timeframe to three million.⁴³ An accounting of China's diplomatic presence on Twitter conducted by the Associated Press in collaboration with the Atlantic Council's Digital Forensic Research Lab, identified a 48 per cent increase in Twitter accounts over the course of 2020, peaking at a total of 195 in December.⁴⁴ The number of equivalent accounts on Facebook stood at 71, rising up from 63 at the beginning of 2020.

China's diplomats are supported by a growing pool of state-funded news organizations that have taken to Western social media platforms in similar fashion. Data available through Hamilton 2.0 in February 2021 puts the number of accounts connected to CPP-controlled media outlets or their staff at 86.

1.4 Achieving Persistence

The openness of China's efforts to establish narrative control through the prominent use of official accounts and other state-linked platforms raises significant complications for managing a response because they break with diplomatic conventions. Blatantly factually incorrect allegations require an open challenge to restrict opportunities for their further amplification. Yet, these steps in turn risk escalation. For instance, claims published on the website of the Chinese embassy in Paris that nursing staff at retirement homes had abandoned residents overnight, leaving them "to die of hunger and disease", caused France's foreign minister to summon the Chinese ambassador.⁴⁵

³⁷ *Ibid.*

³⁸ Xinhua, "Xi urges breaking new ground in major country diplomacy with Chinese characteristics," 24.06.2018. http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2018-06/24/c_137276269.htm

³⁹ State Council Information Office of the PRC, *Summary of the Remarks by Xi Jinping at a 25 December visit the People's Liberation Army Daily*, 28.12.2015. <http://www.scio.gov.cn/37231/37251/Document/1603597/1603597.htm> An English translation of excerpts is available at: David Bandurski, "How Xi Jinping Views the News," *China Media Project*, 03.03.2016. <http://chinamediaproject.org/2016/03/03/39672/>

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*

⁴¹ China Journalist Association, "'Golden and Silver Lake of Life and Death', making China's anti-epidemic story more spreading and penetrating," *People's Daily*, 25.08.2020. <http://media.people.com.cn/n1/2020/0825/c40606-31835124.html>

⁴² Alliance for Securing Democracy, *Hamilton 2.0 Dashboard*. <https://securingdemocracy.gmfus.org/hamilton-dashboard/>

⁴³ This steep increase is partially accounted for by the inclusion of 30 additional diplomatic accounts not tracked earlier, although they were created prior to March 2020. Jessica Brandt / Bret Schafer, "How China's 'wolf warrior' diplomats use and abuse Twitter," *Brookings*, 28.10.2020. <https://www.brookings.edu/techstream/how-chinas-wolf-warrior-diplomats-use-and-abuse-twitter/#ftnref1>

⁴⁴ Erika Kinetz, "Anatomy of a Conspiracy: With COVID, China Took Leading Role," *AP*, 15.02.2021. <https://apnews.com/article/pandemics-beijing-only-on-ap-epidemics-media-122b73e134b780919cc1808f3f6f16e8>

⁴⁵ Patrick Wintour, "France summons Chinese envoy after coronavirus 'slur,'" *Guardian*, 15.04.2020. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/apr/15/france-summons-chinese-envoy-after-coronavirus-slur>

Direct challenges of this kind prove a lot more costly and doubtfully effective, when messaging campaigns are misconstruing, suppressing or favorably inflating but not explicitly fabricating facts. China's narrative control efforts have striven to harness their openness as a tool to blur the line between disinformation and government propaganda, to expand the playing field for messaging driven by official, state-affiliated actors.

To this end, China's narrative control efforts have sought to leverage the privileges that social media rules have created for statements from political figures and content deemed newsworthy, channeling core messages through the accounts of diplomats and media outlets rather than ephemeral fake accounts, as part of a strategy to avoid the takedown of posts or accounts.

In October 2020, the US Department of Justice seized 92 domain names from the control of Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) that had operated under the IRGC's direction "disguised as genuine news outlets".⁴⁶ Commenting on the confiscation, John Demers, Assistant Attorney General for National Security, cautioned that, "[f]ake news organizations [had] become a new outlet for disinformation spread by authoritarian countries as they continue to try to undermine our democracy."⁴⁷ This loss of operational infrastructure, from Iran's perspective, documents the risk that the use of fake accounts and news outlets can pose to the persistence of influence attempts. Enlisting established media outlets in its influence operations, China sidesteps this challenge.

Public opinion polls that surveyed popular attitudes towards China in Italy and Serbia, two countries that have been in the focus of both China's aid diplomacy and a bot-driven social media campaign to boost awareness about China's supplies and create the impression of widespread grass-roots gratitude for China's assistance,⁴⁸ indicate that persistence can play a crucial role.

In a poll commissioned by the European Council on Foreign Relations (ECFR) in late April, a quarter of Italians named China as their country's greatest ally in the coronavirus crisis. By comparison, 4 per cent pointed to the EU as fulfilling this critical support role.⁴⁹ The

same poll showed marked differences in the public attitude in Italy towards China and the US. Asked about how their opinion on either country had changed during the coronavirus crisis, a relative majority of 48 per cent said their view of the US had worsened, while 9 per cent mentioned that their perception had improved. For China, 37 per cent indicated a deterioration in their opinion. However, 21 per cent stated to have gained a more positive image of China. Views in Italy were notably more positive on China than across other surveyed countries in Europe.

A separate survey conducted in March showed an overwhelming number of Serbians (39.9 per cent) believed China to be the leading foreign donor to their country. Less than half as many Serbians (17.6 per cent) correctly identified the EU as Serbia's largest foreign aid donor.⁵⁰ As of June 2020, the EU has offered support to Serbia in the order of 1.819 million EUR from 2010 to 2020, far surpassing China's pledge of 56 million EUR for the same period.⁵¹

Additional support for these effects on public opinion is offered by data collected by the Sinofon project at Palacký University in September and October 2020. For Italians and Serbians asked about which country/entity they thought had helped their country during the coronavirus crisis, China surpassed the EU by close to 20 per cent and 30 per cent respectively.⁵² 32 per cent of Serbians even said they thought China's international reputation had improved as a result of the pandemic.

2 Playing to the Edge

2.1 Engineering Influence Operations within the Limits of Platform Rules

Reflecting on the need to maintain and use capabilities for espionage, General Michael Hayden, the former Director of the NSA, emphasized the need of "playing to the edge". By this term Hayden understood the

⁴⁶ Department of Justice of the United States, "United States Seizes Domain Names Used by Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps," 07.10.2020. <https://www.justice.gov/opa/pr/united-states-seizes-domain-names-used-iran-s-islamic-revolutionary-guard-corps>

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*

⁴⁸ For details on these messaging campaigns see: Rebecca Arcesati, "Competing with China in the Digital Age," in Mikko Huotari / Jan Weidenfeld / Claudia Wessling (eds.) *Towards a "Principles-First Approach" in Europe's China Policy*, MERICS, September 2020, <https://merics.org/en/report/towards-principles-first-approach-europes-china-policy>; Francesco Bechis / Gabriele Garrar, "How China unleashed Twitter bots to spread COVID-19 propaganda in Italy," *formiche*, 31.03.2020, <https://formiche.net/2020/03/china-unleashed-twitter-bots-covid19-propaganda-italy/>; Digital Forensic Center, "A Bot Network Arrived in Serbia along with Coronavirus,"

13.04.2020. <https://dfcme.me/en/dfc-finds-out-a-botnet-arrived-in-serbia-along-with-coronavirus/>

⁴⁹ Ivan Krastev / Mark Leonard, "Europe's pandemic politics: How the virus has changed the public's worldview," *European Council on Foreign Relations*, 24.06.2020. https://www.ecfr.eu/publications/summary/europes_pandemic_politics_how_the_virus_has_changed_the_publics_worldview

⁵⁰ Radio Freed Europe/ Radio Liberty, "Who Gives The Most Aid To Serbia?," 09.06.2020. <https://www.rferl.org/a/who-gives-the-most-aid-to-serbia-/30660859.html>

⁵¹ Based on estimates, China has disbursed about 6.6 million EUR of this commitment. Financial figures, both for the EU and China, only reflect assistance provided by government institutions.

⁵² Richard Q. Turcsányi et al., "European public opinion on China in the age of COVID-19," *Sinofon*, November 2020, 23. <https://sinofon.cz/wp-content/uploads/2020/11/COMP-poll-final.pdf>

competitive imperative to use “all the tools and all the authorities available, much like how a good athlete takes advantage of the entire playing field right up to the sideline markers and endlines.”⁵³ A similar underlying idea is captured in the Chinese term “edge ball” (擦边球). The CCP has adapted this approach to online propaganda to strengthen the persistence of its messaging on social media platforms. In China’s context, the sport analogy shifts from American football to table tennis but retains its central meaning of exhausting all legal possibilities, irrespective of the ends. Edge ball “is a term widely used in media and journalism to refer to creative compliance. The meaning comes from the game of ping-pong. Where the ball hits the edge of the table it is a winner.” The aim is to play “the ball to the very edge of the ping-pong table to score legitimately”.⁵⁴

Mirroring tactics used by netizens and journalists within China to evade political censorship by skirting the boundaries of acceptable online expression, social media posts by Chinese diplomats and state-controlled news outlets during the pandemic have sought to aggressively shape reporting and perceptions. These efforts have closely aligned with the themes and drivers mentioned above, namely: promoting China’s role in providing public goods, distracting from initial failure to contain the pandemic, fueling alternative narratives about the origin of the virus, emphasizing the failure of democratic pandemic crisis management, and telling the story of the successful Chinese containment strategy.

This messaging has largely been framed to stay within the boundaries of platform rules. Perceptively taking advantage of carve-outs, to claim inaction by social media platforms as confirmation that China is abiding by the rules and as stamp of legitimacy for its narrative control efforts.

In addition to being under central direction, which aligns with CCP’s preference for maintaining information control, diplomats and media organizations enjoy exemptions on social media due to their status as public figures or entities and producers of “newsworthy” content.

This differentiated treatment in the platform policies of both Twitter and Facebook has emerged

against the backdrop of populist politicians in democracies that challenged platform rules while attracting significant engagement through polarization and provocation – but also legitimate public interest about their views and positions.

The role of domestic enablers has received continuous attention in studies of foreign influence operations. Such factors have included reductive media coverage on disinformation campaigns, the exploitation of existing social and political divisions by actors seeking to leverage these previously held beliefs to support the domestic proliferation of their influence narrative, as well as the instrumentalization of the opportunism of domestic politicians by getting them to promote disinformation narratives that promise to be useful for their own campaign.

In a more structural way, carve-outs on social media platforms, originally created for political figures in a democratic context, have been exploited by Chinese officials to push out their own narratives, at times alluding to known disinformation, trying to mask them as public diplomacy.

Twitter notably invoked newsworthiness considerations following question why a tweet by former President Trump had not been deleted that referred to North Korea’s ruler Kim Jong Un as a “madman who doesn’t mind starving or killing his people” and threatened that Un would “be tested like never before”.⁵⁵ North Korea’s foreign minister responded to Trump’s statement by calling it a “clear declaration of war”.⁵⁶ For its assessment of newsworthy behavior and the legitimate public interest of a tweet, Twitter explains that “[t]o help ensure people have an opportunity to see every side of an issue, there may be the rare occasion when we allow controversial content or behavior which may otherwise violate our Rules to remain on our service”.⁵⁷

Statements from official representatives and coverage from established news organizations have a clear advantage in meeting this standard. These exceptions appear to have been extended for posts from Chinese diplomatic accounts that would otherwise contravene Twitter’s policies on platform manipulation⁵⁸ and coordinated harmful activity⁵⁹ because of the coordinated and at times inauthentic

⁵³ Ibid., xiv.

⁵⁴ Michael Kean and Zhongdang Pan as quoted in Guobin Yang, *The Power of the Internet in China: Citizen Activism Online* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2009).

⁵⁵ Twitter Public Policy, “Among the considerations is ‘newsworthiness’ and whether a Tweet is of public interest 3/6,” twitter.com, 26.09.2017. <https://twitter.com/policy/status/912438362010783744>

⁵⁶ Bill Chappell, “‘Declaration Of War’ Means North Korea Can Shoot Down U.S. Bombers, Minister Says,” *NPR*, 25.09.2017. <https://www.npr.org/sections/thetwo-way/2017/09/25/553475174/declaration-of-war-means-north-korea-can-shoot-down-u-s-bombers-minister-says?t=1614129183513>

⁵⁷ Twitter, “Our approach to policy development and enforcement philosophy,” General Guidelines and Policies, accessed on 28.02.2021. <https://help.twitter.com/en/rules-and-policies/enforcement-philosophy>

⁵⁸ Twitter, “Platform manipulation and spam policy,” General Guidelines and Policies, accessed on 28.02.2021. <https://help.twitter.com/en/rules-and-policies/platform-manipulation>

⁵⁹ Twitter, “Coordinated harmful activity,” General Guidelines and Policies, accessed on 28.02.2021. <https://help.twitter.com/en/rules-and-policies/coordinated-harmful-activity>

engagement they have received in efforts to make these accounts and messages look more popular (for more details see section 3.3).

Facebook has similarly exceptions in place, exempting politicians from its third-party fact-checking program and explicitly extending newsworthiness exemptions to politicians.⁶⁰ At the same time, an internal presentation from Facebook from summer 2019 reportedly concluded that excluding politicians from fact-checking “is protecting content that is especially likely to deceive”.⁶¹

Both companies weigh public interest against possible harm in their decisions about keeping accounts and posts online. The current publicly available definitions of harm from both companies make it unlikely that attempts at narrative control would consistently rise to a level of harm that would warrant their deletion. Under these circumstances, platform rules will tend to make it possible for official accounts that can claim newsworthiness exceptions almost by default, to engage in aggressive messaging in ways individual, notably fake or hacked accounts, would not be able to. Through these carve-outs, Chinese diplomats and media organizations have been able to share manipulative content that sidesteps rules on the platforms intended to combat coordinated influence attempts. While rules are adapted and adjusted, the question remains whether they catch up quickly enough with the evolution of influence tactics to mitigate influence efforts (see section 4.4 for a detailed discussion of additional steps that Twitter and Facebook have taken).

These developments highlight two important interrelations between domestic and foreign influence agents. First, the leeway social media platforms accord to figures of public interest and the exploitation of these possibilities by national politicians inadvertently abet foreign interference in another crucial way. It sets precedents for the interpretation of platform rules that grant greater space to maneuver for foreign actors that claim the same status and treatment.

Second, domestic media organizations and national politicians might give legitimacy to foreign influence attempts that would otherwise gain little traction by acting as receiving vessels for foreign

narratives spread via social media. Crucially, such narratives might be amplified opportunistically by domestic actors out of interests that may or may not align with those of the foreign sponsor of an influence operation.

Disinformation experts have continuously emphasized the role that local news organizations and political figures play in disinformation operations, including influence attempts authored or spurred by foreign powers.⁶² Advising reporters on the decision about whether a story about specific influence material meets the public interest test and justifies reporting, Claire Wardle suggests to consider a “tipping point” criterion: if the underlying information is not yet broadly circulating, beyond a selective core group, reporting on it will only “provide oxygen, increasing the likelihood that it will reach the tipping point”.⁶³

As part of journalistic best practices developed based on a survey of journalists about what they have learned from past instances in which media amplified disinformation, Whitney Phillips offered that, “[i]nformation that does not reach the tipping point, can’t be framed to serve the public’s benefit”.⁶⁴

Implementing this guidance into the logic of news reporting, considering frictions with its focus on breaking news and investigating stories that by definition have not reached that “tipping point”, are a continuous challenge.

In 2020, the Reuters Institute surveyed user views on whether social media platforms should carry statements from politicians that may include false claims. The difference of opinion between those in favor and those opposing reporting of such statements in Switzerland is noticeably smaller compared to the vast majority of the forty countries included in the survey, where support for reporting statements prevails by a wider margin.⁶⁵ Yet, respondents from Switzerland indicated strong support for blocking political ads on social media that contain false information.⁶⁶

Notably, those who stated to be not at all politically interested were only about half as likely to say that the media should report statements from politicians that could contain false information than those with a strong interest in politics.⁶⁷ Relatedly, those who stated to have no interest in politics were less than half as likely to say that political ads featuring possibly

⁶⁰ Nick Clegg, “Facebook, Elections and Political Speech, Facebook,” 24.09.2019. <https://about.fb.com/news/2019/09/elections-and-political-speech/>

⁶¹ Alex Heath, “Facebook Researchers Found Its ‘Political Whitelist’ Influenced Misinformation Spread,” *The Information*, 24.11.2020. <https://www.theinformation.com/articles/facebook-researchers-found-companys-political-whitelist-influenced-misinformation-spread>

⁶² Heather A. Conley et al., “The Kremlin Playbook 2: The Enablers,” *Center for Strategic and International Studies*, March 2019. https://csis-website-prod.s3.amazonaws.com/s3fs-public/publication/190327_Conley_KPIL_interior_v3_WEB.pdf

⁶³ Whitney Phillips, “The Oxygen of Amplification: Better Practices for Reporting on Extremists, Antagonists, and Manipulators – Part 1: In Their Own Words,” *Data&Society*, May 2018, 4. <https://datasociety.net/library/oxygen-of-amplification/>

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 14.

⁶⁵ Nic Newman et al., “Reuters Institute Digital News Report 2020,” *University of Oxford*, June 2020, 43. https://reutersinstitute.politics.ox.ac.uk/sites/default/files/2020-06/DNR_2020_FINAL.pdf

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 44.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 43.

false information should be allowed to run on social media platforms.⁶⁸ This divide, based on the level of political interest, indicates that those who have lower interest in political content, and may spend less time on verifying claims by politicians they encounter online, would like to delegate this responsibility to technology companies. These differences in attitudes also point to possibly higher vulnerability to influence attempts that those with a lower political interest have identified for themselves.

2.2 Finding the Edge

The openness of the playing field is best illustrated by the rare occasions where Chinese officials have overshot and lost the edge.

Two tweets from Zhao Lijian, a spokesperson of China's Foreign Ministry and deputy director general of the ministry's information department, sent on 12 and 13 March show where Twitter draws the line on misleading content. Zhao has a long track record of forward-leaning messaging on Twitter, engaging in fierce online confrontation of Beijing's critics during his time as deputy head of mission in Islamabad, including open accusations of racism to dismiss concerns about China's treatment of ethnic minority groups in Xinjiang.⁶⁹ Both tweets sought to implicate the US in the coronavirus outbreak and were eventually marked with fact-checking labels by Twitter.

The 12 March tweet misconstrued a statement by an official from the US Center for Disease Control and Prevention about the possibility that early Covid-19 cases may have been misdiagnosed as influenza because of a lack of testing capabilities. Zhao used the statement to allege that a previous outbreak among US soldiers traveling to China to participate in the Military World Games might have been the source of the first coronavirus cases in Wuhan.⁷⁰ However, no coronavirus

infections have been reported for the 280 US athletes and staff members visiting Wuhan.⁷¹

The 13 March tweet falsely claimed to provide "further evidence that the virus originated in the US"⁷² by linking to a "report" by the Canada-based Centre for Research on Globalization – also referred to as Global Research. Despite its claim to conduct research, the outlet has routinely used its publications to promote conspiracy theories and has been classified as a steady source of disinformation and propaganda by the US State Department.⁷³

Twitter's fact-check notices were applied two months after the tweets were originally posted and in all probability after the tipping-point mark for assessing public awareness about the posts had been crossed, raising questions about their effectiveness. In fact, the labels were added in response to a media request and followed the precedent introduced by first labeling a tweet from former President Trump.⁷⁴

According to the *New York Post*, the fact that the labels were applied at all has to do with the newspaper's enquiries to the social media company whether they were considering to add fact-check warnings similar to those received by Trump for some of Zhao's messages – specifically referring to the two tweets from March.⁷⁵ Based on the *New York Post*'s reporting, a Twitter spokesperson first replied that the company would not take any additional steps at this time. When asked for additional information on this decision, the spokesperson later announced that "after further review" the company "added labels to these two tweets."⁷⁶

In May 2020, Hua Chunying – Zhao's superior and leading spokesperson at the Foreign Ministry – re-upped contrived theories about the coronavirus originating from the US in the run-up to the adoption of plans by the National People's Congress, China's national legislature, to introduce far-reaching security legislation for Hong Kong. The timing of Hua's tweet suggests a possible

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 45.

⁶⁹ Owen Churchill, "Chinese diplomat Zhao Lijian, known for his Twitter outbursts, is given senior foreign ministry post," *South China Morning Post*, 24.08.2019. <https://www.scmp.com/news/china/diplomacy/article/3024180/chinese-diplomat-zhao-lijian-known-his-twitter-outbursts-given>

⁷⁰ Lijian Zhao 赵立坚 (@zlj517), "2/2 CDC was caught on the spot. When did patient zero begin in US? How many people are infected? What are the names of the hospitals? It might be US army who brought the epidemic to Wuhan. Be transparent! Make public your data! US owe us an explanation!", twitter.com, 12.03.2020. <https://twitter.com/zlj517/status/123811898828066823>

⁷¹ Steven Lee Myers, "China Spins Tale That the U.S. Army Started the Coronavirus Epidemic," *New York Times*, 13.03.2020. <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/03/13/world/asia/coronavirus-china-conspiracy-theory.html>

⁷² Lijian Zhao 赵立坚 (@zlj517), "This article is very much important to each and every one of us. Please read and retweet it. COVID-19:

Further Evidence that the Virus Originated in the US. <https://www.globalresearch.ca/covid-19-further-evidence-virus-originated-us/5706078>, twitter.com, 13.03.2020. <https://twitter.com/zlj517/status/1238269193427906560>

⁷³ Global Engagement Center, "Pillars of Russia's Disinformation and Propaganda Ecosystem," *US Department of State*, August 2020. https://www.state.gov/wp-content/uploads/2020/08/Pillars-of-Russia%E2%80%99s-Disinformation-and-Propaganda-Ecosystem_08-04-20.pdf

⁷⁴ BBC, "Twitter fact-checks China amid bias row," 28.05.2020. <https://www.bbc.com/news/technology-52833063>

⁷⁵ Steven Nelson, "Twitter fact-checks China official after Post presses on Trump double standard," *New York Post*, 27.05.2020. <https://nypost.com/2020/05/27/twitter-factchecks-china-after-post-presses-on-trump-double-standard/>

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*

attempt to distract international audiences from the then impending decision.

Sidelining Hong Kong's legislative processes and threatening severe punishment for any actions deemed seditious and subversive, the plans for the law received fierce international criticism. A resolution by the European Parliament noted that a unilateral adoption of the law would mark a breach of the Sino-British Joint Declaration safeguarding Hong Kong's autonomy and of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights. The European Parliament consequently called on the EU and its member states to consider bringing a case to the International Court of Justice.⁷⁷

The content of Hua's tweet itself⁷⁸ bears striking resemblance to Zhao's earlier insinuations, baselessly musing about the announcement by then President Trump that scientists at the US National Institutes of Health (NIH) had begun developing a coronavirus vaccine on 11 January⁷⁹ as a possible indication that coronavirus cases occurred in the US before the outbreak in Wuhan. In reality, vaccine development at the NIH, followed the genome sequencing of the SARS-Cov-2 virus by a Chinese-led research group, which was communicated on 10 January via Virulogical.org, a platform for sharing data on public health research prepublication.⁸⁰ Chinese officials began sharing genetic data of the virus on 12 January.⁸¹

Despite these parallels in the message centered on sowing doubts about the origin of the outbreak in both tweets, Hua's post did not receive a fact-checking label, demarcating the fine line that separates the playing field from the edge.

Zhao's social media activity shed further light on labeling practices and their doubtful effect in consistently catching misleading narrative control campaigns, when Zhao, in a separate tweet, tabled the conspiracy theory again in June, this time phrased as questions. Carefully

ensuring to introduce the tweet's content as questions, in addition to ending every sentence with a question mark, the tweet eschewed a fact-checking mark.⁸²

As a follow up to Zhao Lijian's insinuations, Foreign Minister Wang later reduced this denial of China's central responsibility for containing the outbreak to the general allegation that "[m]ore and more research suggests that the pandemic was likely to have been caused by separate outbreaks in multiple places in the world."⁸³

Staying on the right side of the edge is critical to achieving persistence and a continuous balancing act, testing out what is possible as social media companies adjust. Following Zhao's tweets in March China's ambassador to the US, Cui Tiankai, in an interview with Axios reiterated his position that theories about the novel coronavirus having emerged from a military lab, not in China, but in the US amounted to little more than "crazy things".⁸⁴ A few days later Zhao struck a noticeably more conciliatory tone in his Twitter messages, emphasizing the need to "unite to deal with the epidemic and carry out international cooperation to save more lives."⁸⁵

2.3 The Sharp Edge: China's Coercive Diplomacy

Beijing's efforts at narrative control have also been supported by off-platform activities, including through diplomatic channels. Among other items, this push has comprised the solicitation of favorable third-party statements commending China for its crisis response and international assistance – in a bid to strengthen authenticity and provide external vindication for China's own statements. On the more coercive end, steps to shape the public image of China also included exerting

⁷⁷ European Parliament, *Resolution of 19 June 2020 on the PRC national security law for Hong Kong and the need for the EU to defend Hong Kong's high degree of autonomy (2020/2665(RSP))*, 19.06.2020. https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/TA-9-2020-0174_EN.html

⁷⁸ Hua Chunying 华春莹 (@SpokespersonCHN), "Scientists at the US NIH began developing a #COVID19 vaccine on January 11. There were reports of cases as early as November last year. Any explanation or investigation?," twitter.com, 20.05.2020. <https://twitter.com/SpokespersonCHN/status/1263053023137263616>

⁷⁹ White House, "Remarks by President Trump on Vaccine Development," 15.05.2020. <https://trumpwhitehouse.archives.gov/briefings-statements/remarks-president-trump-vaccine-development/>

⁸⁰ Edward Holmes, "Novel 2019 coronavirus genome," virological.org, 28.01.2020. <https://virological.org/t/novel-2019-coronavirus-genome/319>

⁸¹ World Health Organization, "Novel Coronavirus – China," 12.01.2020. <https://www.who.int/csr/don/12-january-2020-novel-coronavirus-china/en/>

⁸² Lijian Zhao 赵立坚 (@zlj517), "Soul-searching questions for Navarro: What's behind the closure of the biolab at Fort Detrick? What's the connection between the closure, vaping lung disease, the flu & #COVID19? When will US invite experts to investigate the origin of the virus in US?," twitter.com. 06.06.2020. <https://twitter.com/zlj517/status/1280131459429232645>

⁸³ Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the PRC, "State Councilor and Foreign Minister Wang Yi Gives Interview To Xinhua News Agency and China Media Group On International Situation and China's Diplomacy in 2020," 02.01.2021. https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/zxxx_662805/t1844079.shtml

⁸⁴ Embassy of the PRC in the United States, "Ambassador Cui Tiankai taking an interview with AXIOS and HBO (Transcript)," 23.03.2020. <http://www.china-embassy.org/eng/zmgxs/zxxx/t1759558.htm>

⁸⁵ Lijian Zhao 赵立坚 (@zlj517), "#COVID19 epidemic once again proves that mankind is a community with a shared future. In the face of #COVID19, how terrible the virus is, and how fragile the life is. We should unite to deal with the epidemic and carry out international cooperation to save more lives.," twitter.com, 23.03.2020. <https://twitter.com/zlj517/status/1242117540056358918>

pressure on foreign counterparts to water down official reporting on China's influence activities and wash Chinese claims clean of disinformation accusations.

A *Global Times* editorial, in response to what it viewed as undue allegations about the damaging effects of China's aggressive diplomacy on its international reputation by Western media, asserted in March 2020 that, "China's image as a responsible world power has been further strengthened, rather than dented."⁸⁶ To back up this statement, the editorial invoked claims of support from 170 state leaders and leaders of more than 40 international and regional organizations.

The extraction of positive comments from foreign representatives, tacitly and explicitly in exchange for the delivery – and sometimes donation – of much-needed protective equipment has provided feedstock for China's image campaign, including on social media.

High-level praise, for instance, has come from Serbia's President Aleksandar Vucic, who called China "[t]he only country that can help".⁸⁷ In a side blow to the EU's decision in mid-March to set limits for the export of protective equipment, Vucic added: "As for the rest, thanks for nothing." In a conversation with China's ambassador to Serbia, Vucic also noted that Europe could "hardly defend itself" without China's support.⁸⁸

Italy's Foreign Minister Luigi Di Maio nicknamed by critics as "the Chinese minister",⁸⁹ in a Facebook video featured the arrival of medical staff from China and the offloading of medical equipment from a Chinese plane.⁹⁰ In an op-ed for *Politico*, Italy's permanent representative to the EU publicly expressed his disappointment that "not a single EU country responded" when Italy requested to activate the European Union Mechanism of Civil Protection to get access to medical supplies for personal protection. Even though not a participant in the mechanism, China, however, responded bilaterally.⁹¹

Jan Hamacek, Interior Minister of the Czech Republic, viewed China as "the only country capable of

supplying Europe with such amounts [of masks and medical equipment]."⁹² And Spain's Prime Minister Pedro Sanchez declared during his announcement of a state of emergency for Spain in March, explained that he would "draw from China's experience" in responding to the virus.⁹³

Public commendations in reciprocation for China's provision of medical supplies also hailed from authoritarian countries. Thanking China for its assistance, the Chief of Staff of the Iranian Armed Forces, Major General Mohammad Hossein Baqeri, noted that, "the humanitarian moves exhibited by China, while it was struggling with the outbreak of this dangerous disease itself, have drawn the admiration of everyone".⁹⁴

China's efforts at polishing the public record of its influence activities extend beyond the collection of positive soundbites.

In spring 2020, Chinese officials reportedly attempted to impede the publication of portions of a report prepared by the Strategic Communications (StratCom) division of the European External Action Service (EEAS) concerning Chinese influence activities.⁹⁵

A draft of the report was leaked to the press ahead of the final report's publication. Subsequent reporting by *Politico* quoted excerpts of the document, including strong judgments on China, most notably the finding that China had "continued to run a global disinformation campaign to deflect blame for the outbreak of the pandemic and improve its international image. Both overt and covert tactics have been observed".⁹⁶

After learning about the language of the upcoming report, Chinese officials reached out to the EU delegation in Beijing to stop the document's publication, according to two diplomats "with knowledge of the exchange".⁹⁷ The official version of the report released on 24 April significantly dialed back the assessment of China's engagement in disinformation, concluding that,

⁸⁶ Shi Tian, "Let the West deceive itself in virus fight," *Global Times*, 10.03.2020. <https://www.globaltimes.cn/content/1182167.shtml>

⁸⁷ Louisa Lim, "China Is Trying to Rewrite The Present," *Foreign Policy*, 23.03.2020. <https://foreignpolicy.com/2020/03/23/china-is-trying-to-rewrite-the-present/>

⁸⁸ Samuel Stolton, "Huawei to 'scale down' supply of COVID-19 masks, after Borrell comments," *Euractiv*, 26.03.2020. <https://www.euractiv.com/section/digital/news/no-more-coronavirus-masks-from-us-huawei-says/>

⁸⁹ Jacopo Barigazzi, "Italy's foreign minister hails Chinese coronavirus aid," *Politico*, 13.03.2020. <https://www.politico.eu/article/italys-foreign-minister-hails-chinese-coronavirus-aid/>

⁹⁰ Luigi Di Maio, livestream on Facebook, facebook.com, 12.03.2020, 22:10. <https://www.facebook.com/LuigiDiMaio/videos/138152874240472/>

⁹¹ Maurizio Massari, "Italian ambassador to the EU: Italy needs Europe's help," *Politico*, 10.03.2020. <https://www.politico.eu/article/coronavirus-italy-needs-europe-help/>

⁹² Stolton, "Huawei to 'scale down' supply of COVID-19 masks,".

⁹³ Martin Arostegui, "Chinese Virus Aid to Europe Raises Long-Term Concerns," *Voice of America*, 23.03.2020. <https://www.voanews.com/science-health/coronavirus-outbreak/chinese-virus-aid-europe-raises-long-term-concerns>

⁹⁴ Tasnim News, "Iran's Top General Praises Chinese Support in Coronavirus Fight," 23.03.2020. <https://www.tasnimnews.com/en/news/2020/03/23/2228809/iran-s-top-general-praises-chinese-support-in-coronavirus-fight>

⁹⁵ Matt Apuzzo, "Pressured by China, E.U. Softens Report on Covid-19 Disinformation," *New York Times*, 06.01.2021. <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/04/24/world/europe/disinformation-china-eu-coronavirus.html>

⁹⁶ Florian Eder, "POLITICO Brussels Playbook: Disinfo warning — Money talks — Europe's new tracking apps," *Politico*, 21.04.2020. <https://www.politico.eu/newsletter/brussels-playbook/politico-brussels-playbook-disinfo-warning-money-talks-europes-new-tracking-apps/>

⁹⁷ Apuzzo, "Pressured by China, E.U. Softens Report".

in contrast to Russia, China was deploying conspiracy narratives and disinformation “to a lesser extent”. The report also found “evidence of a coordinated push by official Chinese sources to deflect any blame for the outbreak of the pandemic and publicizing announcements and deliveries of bilateral assistance, with polls in certain countries showing China being perceived as more helpful in fighting the pandemic than the EU.”⁹⁸

According to the *New York Times*, Esther Osorio, a senior advisor to HR/VP Borrell, had asked analysts to distinguish between pushing disinformation and aggressively pushing a narrative, noting that, “we already see heavy pushback from CN”, using an abbreviation for China.⁹⁹

In email correspondence reviewed by the *New York Times*, an EEAS analyst warned colleagues and her superiors that, “[s]uch appeasement will set a terrible precedent and encourage similar coercion in the future”.¹⁰⁰ Underscoring the potentially far-reaching implications, the e-mail describes changes to the quoted version of the report as “self-censoring to appease the Chinese Communist Party.” The analyst left the EEAS soon after the incident, by her own account out of “a decision of conscience”, explaining that she was “very troubled by how the EEAS handled the incident in question” and concluded that she “could no longer be effective in [her] role given the dominating political pressures in the institution.”¹⁰¹ Independent of any changes to the report, these developments indicate the damage that Chinese interference in reporting on their activities can have on the analytic capabilities responsible for uncovering such influence attempts in the first place.

Reuters separately analyzed EU diplomatic correspondence concerning China's suppression attempts, which quotes Chinese foreign ministry official Yang Xiaoguang as saying that publishing the report in the leaked version would make the Chinese leadership “very angry”.¹⁰² In a thinly-veiled reference to the US, Yang accused EU officials of preparing the report for ulterior motives to appeal to “someone else”. Four diplomatic sources confirmed to Reuters that the report cited by Politico was scheduled for publication on 21 April, but that the release was delayed following China's contestation.

The delay in publication, intermittent leaks, and eventual revisions to the report highlighted its existence and findings, even as the final version moderated the original key finding that had classified China's influence attempts as a “global disinformation campaign” and emphasized assessments of China's narrative coordination instead. This visible change in language, independent of the wording of the final report itself, established an important distinction that China may invoke in its defense.

These implications notwithstanding, the report addressed China's efforts at controlling and integrating its narratives, describing a “high level of coordination between different parts of the Chinese system in messaging and amplification of messages across different languages and communication channels”, and highlighted China's use of “overt and covert tactics” in this respect.¹⁰³ These findings underline the importance of understanding the strategic implications and ambitions that transcend and tie individual Chinese messaging threads together.

The change in language in the EEAS report has allowed China to distance itself from accusations of spreading disinformation and brand its influence efforts as direct communication with the global public.

Three weeks after the publication of the EEAS report, Zhao Lijian – the same diplomat who controversially intimated that the US military brought the coronavirus to China – declared at a Foreign Ministry's regular press conference that, “China opposes creating or spreading disinformation. Allegations in relevant reports of China spreading disinformation on Twitter are unfounded.”¹⁰⁴ Adding injury to insult, Zhao gave this statement on 13 May – right around the time when he was posting the tweets that later were flagged for fact-checking by Twitter.

Zhao defended the growing presence of Chinese diplomats on Western social media platforms as a step “to better communicate with the world and introduce China's situation and policies” and effort “to strengthen communication and exchange with the outside world to enhance our mutual understanding.”¹⁰⁵

The German newspaper *Welt am Sonntag* on 12 April 2020, reported on attempts by Chinese officials to get in touch with German government representatives to

⁹⁸ EUvsDisinfo, “EEAS SPECIAL REPORT UPDATE: Short Assessment of Narratives and Disinformation around the COVID-19/Coronavirus Pandemic (Updated 2 – 22 April),” 24.04.2020. <https://euvsdisinfo.eu/eeas-special-report-update-2-22-april/>

⁹⁹ Apuzzo, “Pressured by China, E.U. Softens Report”.

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.*

¹⁰¹ Monika Richter, “The Week in 7 questions with Monika Richter and Roland Freudenstein,” recorded by Martens Centre on 17 July 2020, video, 1:48. <https://youtu.be/I0t113kOcOo?t=108>

¹⁰² Raphael Satter / Robin Emmott / Jack Stubbs, “China pressured EU to drop COVID disinformation criticism: sources,” *Reuters*, 25.04.2020. <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-health-coronavirus->

[eu-china/china-pressured-eu-to-drop-covid-disinformation-criticism-sources-idUSKCN227030](https://www.reuters.com/article/us-health-coronavirus-eu-china/china-pressured-eu-to-drop-covid-disinformation-criticism-sources-idUSKCN227030)

¹⁰³ EUvsDisinfo, “EEAS SPECIAL REPORT UPDATE (Updated 2 – 22 April)”.

¹⁰⁴ Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the PRC, *Regular press conference, 13 March 2020*.

https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/xwfw_665399/s2510_665401/2511_665403/t1778769.shtml

¹⁰⁵ Ryan Gallagher, “China's Disinformation Effort Targets Virus, Researcher Says,” *Bloomberg*, 12.05.2020. <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2020-05-12/china-s-disinformation-campaign-targets-virus-and-businessman>

obtain positive statements in support of China's coronavirus response. The outlet revealed that the German Foreign Office, already in March, had informed other German ministries about related Chinese enquiries and advised not to comply with the requests.¹⁰⁶

The Chinese embassy in Berlin denied the veracity of these reports of China's requests for public remarks of support accusing *Welt am Sonntag* of "inaccurate and irresponsible reporting".¹⁰⁷ In its response the embassy pointed to China's international assistance in mitigating the pandemic as "indisputable facts that are widely acknowledged and praised by the international community". Turning the tables, the statement added that, "in no event could a handful of media outlets unscrupulously rewrite" these efforts and countered that, "in the current fight against the pandemic the virus and disinformation are our common enemies". Four days earlier, however, the German Ministry of the Interior had responded to an information request from a member of parliament and confirmed request from Chinese diplomats.¹⁰⁸ The government reply affirmed that these requests were left unanswered, while clarifying that the government on other occasion – and unprompted – had thanked the Chinese leadership for the measures it had taken to contain the pandemic. In these communications, the reply emphasizes, the German government reiterated the central role of transparency for the successful fight against the pandemic.

These cases raise the question of how to address narrative control attempts in ways that avoid the politicization of official statements and intelligence reports that might weaken their credibility. News about the Chinese attempts to adjust reporting or make statements in support of China might be enough to create popular distrust. Reassurances by solicited governments that they did not respond to Chinese pressure and that assessments with respect to China remain unaffected by official requests are inherently difficult to prove publicly and conclusively – at least in the absence of evidence to the contrary. Harsh condemnations of China, however, may come at a cost of their own.

Addressing China's assertive messaging to push its image as responsible stakeholder that sought to leverage China's provision of protective gear, HR/VP Josep Borrell in March 2020 cautioned that "there is a geo-political component including a struggle for influence through spinning and the 'politics of generosity'".¹⁰⁹ In response to Borrell's remarks, Huawei announced that it would wind down its donations of masks to Europe, noting that "[t]his isn't the type of narrative we want ourselves to be associated with".¹¹⁰

On the day the delayed EEAS StratCom report was eventually released, China's Ambassador to the EU, Zhang Ming, gave an interview claiming that China had been the victim of disinformation early on and was grateful for EU assistance to China, without making any claims of "politics of generosity".¹¹¹ Rather, Zhang elaborated, "China's help to Europe, like Europe's help to China, is a sign of solidarity, not political calculation." Implicitly referring to the controversy around the language used in the StratCom report for describing China's influence efforts, Zhang affirmed that, "no matter what kind of labels are put on China's efforts we will continue to do the right thing, that is to extend a helping hand and save as many lives as possible". Zhang's characterization stands out for diplomatically dismissing narrative control while seeking to exercise it.

3 Amplification: A Bridge Too Far?

Amplification attempts have combined openly visible and surreptitious mechanisms. On the overt side, China's growing body of diplomats and state media on social media has established a stable presence for state-controlled messaging by leveraging platform exceptions for accounts of official representatives and newsworthy items. On the covert side, mislabeled ads and artificial amplification through fake or hijacked social media profiles have tried to expand the reach of narratives and inflate impressions of relevance and genuine engagement.

¹⁰⁶ Annelie Naumann / Christian Schweppe, "China will deutsche Beamte zu Propagandisten machen," *Welt*, 12.04.2020. <https://www.welt.de/politik/ausland/article207210613/Corona-China-versucht-deutsche-Beamte-zu-Lob-zu-draengen.html>

¹⁰⁷ Embassy of the PRC in Germany, "Stellungnahme der chinesischen Botschaft zum Bericht von WELT AM SONNTAG," 26.04.2020. <http://de.china-embassy.org/det/sgyw/t1773630.htm>

¹⁰⁸ Margarete Bause, "Schriftliche Frage an die Bundesregierung zu chinesischen Einflussnahmeversuchen auf deutsche Regierungsmitarbeiter*innen," 28.04.2020. <https://www.margarete-bause.de/de/article/135.schriftliche-frage-an-die-bundesregierung->

[zu-chinesischen-einflussnahmeversuchen-auf-deutsche-regierungsmitarbeiterinnen.html](https://www.margarete-bause.de/de/article/135.schriftliche-frage-an-die-bundesregierung-zu-chinesischen-einflussnahmeversuchen-auf-deutsche-regierungsmitarbeiterinnen.html)

¹⁰⁹ EEAS, "EU HRVP Josep Borrell: The Coronavirus pandemic and the new world it is creating," 24.03.2020. https://eeas.europa.eu/delegations/china/76401/eu-hrvp-josep-borrell-coronavirus-pandemic-and-new-world-it-creating_en

¹¹⁰ Stolton, "Huawei to 'scale down' supply of COVID-19 masks".

¹¹¹ Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the PRC, "'Strategic Conversation' between Ambassador Zhang Ming and Shada Islam, Friends of Europe," 26.04.2020. https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/wjb_663304/zwjg_665342/zwb_d_665378/t1773595.shtml

The coordination of inauthentic activity has been the primary basis for platforms to take down accounts. The endeavor to coordinate the dissemination of these narratives through the channels of state media, China's global network of diplomatic missions, government spokespeople and other state propaganda outlets may be covert but state-control of these messages is not. As far as the subtle inception of narratives is concerned, this tactic has seemingly put reach over effect.

3.1 Diplomats: Fostering a Fighting Spirit

Amid the 2019 mass-protests in Hong Kong, an intensifying trade dispute with the US, and mounting international scrutiny of China's treatment of Muslim minority groups in Xinjiang, Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi addressed current and former government officials at a celebration of the 70th anniversary of the Foreign Ministry on 8 November 2019. In his speech, Wang called on the group to show a stronger "fighting spirit" in response to the growing international challenges that China has been facing.¹¹² Wang's instructions marked a change in official directions, to facilitate outspokenness by diplomats and more assertive engagement with foreign audiences. A little less than a month later, on 2 December, and just days before symptoms of the first confirmed COVID-19 cases were observed,¹¹³ China's Foreign Ministry became active on Twitter.¹¹⁴

Already in its first tweet, the Foreign Ministry set a pugnacious tone, addressing reports by Chinese defector and self-identified spy Wang Liqiang about purported plots of Chinese intelligence officers for political interference in Hong Kong, Taiwan, and Australia.¹¹⁵ The tweet calls "those allegations against China, no matter spy cases, infiltration or interference,

[are] just soap operas", contending that "[s]ome people would rather buy lies than authoritative information".¹¹⁶

Wang's invigoration of the "fighting spirit" of China's diplomats holds symbolic meaning for another reason. Several months earlier, in an article for *The Study Times*, a journal of the Central Party School, Hua Chunying, the Director General of the Information Department and chief spokesperson at the Foreign Ministry, had referred to the lack of "fighting spirit" (《斗争精神》) as one of the reasons why China had not yet been able to translate improvements in its international discourse power (《提高国际话语权》) into progress in overcoming considerable gaps in "leading international influence" (《国际影响力领先》).¹¹⁷ Hua joined the growing ranks of Chinese diplomats active on Twitter when she opened her account, the first of any of China's chief spokespersons, on 14 February 2020.¹¹⁸

Elements of this diplomatic overture have evolved from domestic precursors, in China's information control and propaganda practices more generally and in the emphasis of direct public engagement in particular. In December 2018, the General Office of the State Council, the highest executive body of China's government, issued an Opinion calling on all governmental institutions, from the municipal level to the central government, to leverage social media as "an important channel for the party and government to contact the masses, serve the masses, and unite the masses in the mobile Internet era."¹¹⁹ The opinion frames these official social media accounts as "new media for government affairs" (《政务新媒体》) and more immediate instrument to "guide public opinion online" (《引导网上舆论》) and to "build a clear and lively cyberspace" (《构建清朗网络空间》).¹²⁰ This push to create new government media structures draws

¹¹² Reuters reporting on the speech introduced this quote which has since been widely referenced. Reuters, "China demands 'fighting spirit' from diplomats as trade war, HK protests simmer," 04.12.2019. <https://www.reuters.com/article/uk-china-diplomacy-idUKKBN1Y80QS>. No official transcript of Wang Yi's speech appears to have been released. A summary of the Wang's talking points in Chinese is available on the ministry's website, though it does not include an exact translation of "fighting spirit". The summary does use the phrase 《接续奋斗》, which translates as "continue to struggle", thus putting the emphasis on the perpetuation of rather than a break from past practice in favor of greater assertiveness. Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the PRC, 《为推进中国特色大国外交接续奋斗》, 09.11.2019. https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/web/wjbj_673089/zyjh_673099/t1714481.shtml

¹¹³ As reported by the WHO: World Health Organization, "Novel Coronavirus – China".

¹¹⁴ The account itself had been created earlier in October 2019.

¹¹⁵ Nick McKenzie / Grace Tobie, "Chinese spy in Australia blows cover to expose secrets and save his own life," *9News*, 24.11.2019. <https://www.9news.com.au/national/60-minutes-chinese-spy->

<publicly-blows-his-cover-australia-news/d05b9236-3fab-44e0-9033-77d54bb2f115>

¹¹⁶ Spokesperson发言人办公室 (@MFA_China), "Dramatic turn of #WangLiqiang's case! Australian media called it #ChinaSpyFarce. Those allegations against China, no matter spy cases, infiltration or interference, are just soap operas. Some people would rather buy lies than authoritative information. Absurd & alerting!", twitter.com, 02.12.2019. https://twitter.com/MFA_China/status/1201494228867547136

¹¹⁷ Hua Chunying, 《占据道义制高点·提升国际话语权》, *Study Times*, 12.07.2019. https://www.thepaper.cn/newsDetail_forward_3900567

¹¹⁸ Global Times, "Chinese FM spokesperson Hua Chunying opens Twitter account," 14.02.2020. <https://www.globaltimes.cn/content/1179567.shtml>

¹¹⁹ Office of the State Council of the PRC, 《国务院办公厅关于推进 政务新媒体健康有序发展的意见》, document no. 123, 07.12.2018. http://www.gov.cn/zhengce/content/2018-12/27/content_5352666.htm

¹²⁰ *Ibid.*

on earlier State Council Opinions¹²¹ addressing the need to take advantage of technology for surveying popular concerns and to increase government responsiveness through direct communication channels. Rogier Creemers eloquently described this effort as “making society legible”¹²²— not only to render government more responsible but also to inform a response narrative that connects to specific concerns and thereby shapes perceptions of government accountability as a measure of managing popular sentiment.

Incidentally, the General Office of the State Council identified “sleeping” accounts, “sensationalist phrases”, and “non-interaction” as some of the problems that government engagement through social media would need to address and overcome.¹²³

Based on the statistical reports by the China Internet Network Information Center (CNNIC) on Internet Development in China,¹²⁴ various Chinese governmental entities had set up a total of 140,600 official accounts on Weibo (a microblogging service similar to Twitter), 82,200 on Toutiao (a news aggregator), and more than 25,300 on Douyin (China's domestic version of the short-video social networking service TikTok).¹²⁵ Slowing growth rates and temporary backslides in the number of Toutiao accounts and Weibo microblogs over the period of 2018 to 2020, however, also point out that even from a raw quantitative perspective the operational translation of such directions may not prove seamless.

As the example of Zhao demonstrates well, Chinese diplomats have been actively engaged in both the creation of content for influence campaigns and its amplification. Based on estimates by the Digital Forensic Lab at the Atlantic Council, Zhao's 12 and 13 March and 13 tweets amassed 47,000 retweets (including quote tweets) and were favorited 82,000 times.¹²⁶ An analysis of the engagement with Zhao's tweets shows references to the tweets in 54 languages and indicates that at least 30 Twitter accounts linked to China's diplomatic

representation or otherwise under state control disseminated the postings. Reports by Chinese state media on Zhao's statements in the immediate aftermath of the tweets generated notably less interaction on social media.¹²⁷ Given their provocative nature, Zhao's postings have received coverage from major media organizations around the world and have featured centrally in think tank reporting on Chinese influence operations during the pandemic. Responsible reporting that appropriately contextualizes and refutes the intimations carried in Zhao's tweets may still inadvertently help entrench underlying narratives by way of providing them a mainstream platform even as they are called into question. Where media coverage results in greater and continued exposure to manipulative material, such content can lend support to disinformation campaigns, in particular among audiences that might view a dismissal by official sources or mainstream media outlets as unconvincing, irrespective of its merits.

A pseudoscientific report by the Chinese virologist Yan Limeng, for instance, purporting that the coronavirus was engineered in a Chinese lab rapidly became one of the most popular COVID-19 papers on Zenodo, an open-access research repository, despite being questioned by researchers from several universities.¹²⁸ The claims advanced by Yan, who with the help of exiled Chinese businessman Guo Wengui and former White House advisor Steve Bannon had fled to the US in April 2020, were picked up by a number of conservative news sites, including outlets associated with Gui and Bannon. Elevated by partisan media networks, the report garnered close to one million views amid challenges to its veracity, including by the MIT Press journal *Rapid Reviews: COVID-19*.¹²⁹ In a review of Yan's paper, released 10 days after the report, the journal issued the stark warning that “[d]ecision-makers should consider the author's claims in this study misleading.”¹³⁰

¹²¹ Opinions of the General Office of the State Council on Further Strengthening Open Government Information Responding to Social Concerns in order to Raise Government Credibility («国务院办公厅关于进一步加强 政府信息公开回应社会关切 提升政府公信力的意见»), document no.100, effective 1 October 2013. http://www.gov.cn/zhengce/content/2013-10/18/content_1219.htm

¹²² Rogier Creemers, “Cyber China: Upgrading Propaganda, Public Opinion Work and Social Management for the Twenty-First Century,” *Journal of Contemporary China* 26:103 (2017), 85-100. <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/pdf/10.1080/10670564.2016.1206281>

¹²³ Office of the State Council of the PRC, «国务院办公厅关于推进 政务新媒体健康有序发展的意见».

¹²⁴ CNNIC is an administrative agency within China's Ministry of Industry and Information Technology, responsible for managing China's top-level domain .cn.

¹²⁵ CNNIC, “Statistical Report on Internet Development in China,” September 2020. <https://cnnic.com.cn/IDR/ReportDownloads/202012/P020201201530023411644.pdf>

¹²⁶ Luiza Bandeira et al., “Weaponized: How rumors about COVID-19's origins led to a narrative arms race,” *Atlantic Council*, February 2021, 36. <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/weaponized-covid19-narratives/>

¹²⁷ *Ibid.*

¹²⁸ Joan Donovan / Jennifer Nilsen, “Cloaked Science: The Yan Reports,” *The Media Manipulation Case Book*, 07.07.2021. <https://mediamanipulation.org/case-studies/cloaked-science-yan-reports>

¹²⁹ *Rapid Reviews: COVID-19* was created to offer quick-turnaround evaluations of preprint publications, normally intended to share time-sensitive scientific findings ahead of lengthy peer-review processes but, as Yan's example shows, in outlier cases may also be used to provide credibility to debunked claims by seeding them through channels used by the scientific community.

¹³⁰ Takahiko Koyama et al., “Reviews of ‘Unusual Features of the SARS-CoV-2 Genome Suggesting Sophisticated Laboratory Modification Rather Than Natural Evolution and Delineation of Its Probable Synthetic Route’”, *Rapid Reviews: COVID-19*, 24.09.2020. <https://rapidreviewscovid19.mitpress.mit.edu/pub/78we86rp/RELEASE/2>

3.2 State Media: Reporting in the Name of the Party

Around the time of the coronavirus outbreak, China's state-media radio stations and TV channels were broadcasting in 180 countries and 60 languages, 24 hours a day.¹³¹ China Radio International claims to service more language groups than any other global media outlet.¹³²

In a speech at the CCP's News and Public Opinion Work Conference in February 2016, Xi Jinping referred to this vast network of state-controlled media as "the propaganda battlefields of the Party and government". Emphasizing unquestioned allegiance, Xi declared that all media "must be surnamed Party. All the work of the Party's news and public opinion media must embody the Party's will, reflect the Party's standpoint". To this end, state media had "to strengthen a mentality of emulation, and to maintain a high degree of consistency with the Party Centre in terms of ideology, politics and conduct".¹³³ Ahead of his address, Xi had visited China's three leading news organizations, the *People's Daily*, Xinhua News Agency, and China Central Television (CCTV). In his remarks, Xi underscored the role of the media in reaching out to foreign audiences. Involving news outlets in the Party's international narrative push, Xi called on representatives of the visited media organizations to "concentrate on telling China's story well" (《集中讲好中国故事》) and to "strive to build a flagship media for foreign propaganda with relatively strong international influence" (《着力打造具有较强国际影响的外宣旗舰媒体》).¹³⁴

A government notice from August 2019 revealed a one-year contract between the Cyberspace

Administration of China (CAC), responsible for online information control, and the *People's Daily* offering 5.8 million CNY, or just over 800,000 USD, to the latter to create and promote positive content about China on Facebook.¹³⁵ State-media supported messaging overture on social media has found unexpected supporters. In reply to a CGTN post reporting on her appointment as Twitter's new Managing Director for Greater China, Kathy Chen seemingly signaled willingness to cooperate, echoing language of Xi's earlier appeal to state media. Chen responded to the tweet by posting: "Let's work together to tell great China story [sic] to the world!"¹³⁶

Telling China's Story: There's an Ad for It

Based on an assessment by the US Department of Homeland Security in October 2020, the number of China's official government posts spreading misleading narratives in the context of the pandemic had doubled as part of a "persistent and large-scale disinformation and influence operations that correlate with diplomatic messaging."¹³⁷

A review by the Stanford Internet Observatory of the Facebook activity of Chinese state media organizations¹³⁸ within the period of 31 December 2019 to 16 March 2020 identified a total of 23,011 posts.¹³⁹ Of this pool, 33 per cent of messages included references to the coronavirus. As a measure of comparison, within the same timespan, leading US mainstream media outlets¹⁴⁰ published 74,196 posts on Facebook, 14 per cent of which carried mentions of the coronavirus. US government-funded media¹⁴¹ reached 5,594 posts overall, with 20 per cent referencing the coronavirus.

¹³¹ Lea Deuber, "Angriff der Wolkrieger," *Sueddeutsche Zeitung*, 11.05.2020. <https://www.sueddeutsche.de/politik/china-angriff-der-wolkrieger-1.4904025>

¹³² China Plus, "What We Do," 16.02.2017. <http://chinaplus.cri.cn/aboutus/aboutcri/62/20170216/392.html>

¹³³ Original Chinese text of the quoted passages: 《党和政府主办的媒体是党和政府的宣传阵地，必须姓党。党的新闻舆论媒体的所有工作，都要体现党的意志、反映党的主张》；《都要增强看齐意识，在思想上政治上行动上同党中央保持高度一致》。 These quotations are based on reporting by the *People's Daily*. *People's Daily*, 《习近平的新闻舆论观》，25.02.2016. <http://politics.people.com.cn/n1/2016/0225/c1001-28147851.html>. For a full English translation of the *People's Daily's* compilation by Rogier Creemers see: China Copyright and Media, "Speech at the News and Public Opinion Work Conference," 26.02.2016. <https://chinacopyrightandmedia.wordpress.com/2016/02/19/speech-at-the-news-and-public-opinion-work-conference/>

¹³⁴ *People's Daily*, 《习近平：坚持正确方向创新方法手段 提高新闻舆论传播力引导力》，19.02.2016. <http://politics.people.com.cn/n1/2016/0219/c1024-28136159.html>

¹³⁵ Sarah Zheng, "How China is spending big to push its official message through Facebook and Twitter," *South China Morning Post*, 21.08.2019.

<https://www.scmp.com/news/china/diplomacy/article/3023782/how-china-spending-big-push-its-official-message-through>

¹³⁶ Kathy Chen (@kathychen2016), "@cctvnews @jack let's work together to tell great China story to the world!", twitter.com, 15.04.2016. <https://twitter.com/kathychen2016/status/720856644670791680>

¹³⁷ Department of Homeland Security of the United States, *Homeland Threat Assessment*, October 2020. https://www.dhs.gov/sites/default/files/publications/2020_10_06_homeland-threat-assessment.pdf

¹³⁸ Reviewed Chinese state media organizations included: CCTV; CGTN; CGTN America; China.org.cn; China Daily; China Xinhua News; Global Times; and People's Daily, China

¹³⁹ Vanessa Molter / Renee DiResta, "Pandemics & propaganda: How Chinese state media creates and propagates CCP coronavirus narratives," *Harvard Kennedy School Misinformation Review* (2020), Special Issue on Covid-19 and Misinformation. <https://doi.org/10.37016/mr-2020-025>

¹⁴⁰ Reviewed US mainstream media organizations included: ABC News; AP; CBS News; CNBC; CNN; Fox News; the Los Angeles Times; MSNBC; NBC News; NPR; POLITICO; the Atlantic; the New York Times; the Wall Street Journal; TIME; and the Washington Post.

¹⁴¹ Reviewed US-government funded media outlets included: Voice of America – VOA; Radio Free Asia; VOA Asia; Africa 54; Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty; VOA Studio 7; and VOA StudentU.

China's media organizations have actively sought to generate attention for their stories among US-based audiences by running undeclared political ads on Facebook and Instagram.¹⁴² Chinese outlets have seized these advertising opportunities to branch out, increase their exposure among foreign audiences, and rapidly expand their following on particularly Facebook. CGTN's English account, for instance, is the media organization with the largest following on Facebook, counting 101 million fans. The account of CGTN alone added 11 million followers between December 2019 and October 2020. Two additional Chinese media outlets place among the top five, *People's Daily*, China and the *Global Times*.¹⁴³ In the period from December 2019 to October 2020, Chinese organizations repeatedly accounted for four of the five fastest-growing media sites.¹⁴⁴ These impressive growth statistics notwithstanding have not in all instances been an exclusive reflection of high-frequency messaging or successful outreach. Xinhua News had earlier been suspected of purchasing followers for its social media presence.¹⁴⁵

Through their use of mislabeled political ads China's state-controlled media organizations have been able to sidestep disclosure policies by Facebook and restrictions taken by Twitter to outright ban the majority of political ads and advertising by state-owned media. In this respect, ads have been a direct way to bring foreign audiences into contact with Chinese narratives even when they were not looking for them.

The cultivation of followers through ads more broadly has also clandestinely contributed to developing foreign audiences in preparation of China's messaging overture. Media outlets have sought to expand their following through the promotion of cultural and entertainment content in the build-up of a messaging apparatus that, as Sarah Cook aptly predicted in January 2020, "can be activated in a crisis to deliver harsh CCP propaganda to large global audiences".¹⁴⁶

Social media ads offer an attractive, low-cost opportunity to expand the reach of digital content, develop new audiences, and targeting groups and geographies in detail. In their review of ads English-language Chinese state media¹⁴⁷ ran on Facebook in the

first quarter of 2020 – the period coinciding with the spread of the coronavirus in China and then the wider world – Vanessa Molter and Renée DiResta from the Stanford Internet Observatory found a notable increase in the overall number of ads and a shift away from cultural content to coronavirus-related stories emphasizing Xi Jinping's leadership.¹⁴⁸ Of the 65 ads Chinese state media pages placed during this period, 77 per cent (50) showed a reference to "coronavirus" or "covid". The contracting media outlets spent somewhere between 12,100 USD and 18,250 USD on such ads with coronavirus mentions that generated impressions in the range of 36.72 million to 38.19 million.¹⁴⁹ By comparison, media organizations financed by the US government until mid-2020 had not contracted any ads on Facebook. Yet, compared to corporate marketing campaigns, the spending of Chinese state media on ads remains at relatively low levels. Of the wider dataset comprising the 146 ads run by Chinese state media since January 2019, between 37 and 73 ads had also been targeted at Switzerland.

3.3 Freeing the Bots from the Bubble

Networks of semi-automated social media accounts have amplified and echoed official Chinese statements in the endeavor to increase the relevance and credence of China's messages. By fabricating the impression of endorsement among regular users, the amplification through bots and fake accounts seeks to inject narratives into the broader public discourse and launder information through the indirect reporting of mainstream media.

For two years, the social media analysis company Graphika has been tracking a network of accounts affiliated with China, dubbed Spamouflage. Over time, the network has deployed several thousands of accounts across multiple platforms, including a presence on Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube. First reported on in September 2019,¹⁵⁰ the cluster has continuously expanded its messaging to include campaigns on topics ranging from attacks against exiled Chinese billionaire

¹⁴² Laura Rosenberger, "China's Coronavirus Information Offensive," *Foreign Affairs*, 22.04.2020. <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/china/2020-04-22/chinas-coronavirus-information-offensive>

¹⁴³ Social Bakers, "Social Media Industry Benchmarks and Regional Insights," accessed 28.02.2021. <https://www.socialbakers.com/statistics/facebook/pages/total/media/page-1-2>

¹⁴⁴ CGTN Global, the *Global Times*, and two sites managed by Xinhua running travel and cultural content.

¹⁴⁵ Tom Grundy, "Did China's state-run news agency purchase Twitter followers?," *Hong Kong Free Press*, 14.04.2015. <https://hongkongfp.com/2015/04/14/did-chinas-state-run-news-agency-purchase-twitter-followers/>

¹⁴⁶ Sarah Cook, "Beijing's Global Megaphone: The Expansion of Chinese Communist Party Media Influence since 2017," *Freedom House*, January 2020. https://freedomhouse-files.s3.amazonaws.com/01152020_SR_China%20Global%20Megaphone_with%20Recommendations%20PDF.pdf

¹⁴⁷ CCTV; CGTN; CGTN America; China.org.cn; China Daily; China Xinhua News

¹⁴⁸ Molter / DiResta, "Pandemics & propaganda".

¹⁴⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁵⁰ Ben Nimmo / C. Shawn Eib / L. Tamora, "Cross-Platform Spam Network Targeted Hong Kong Protests," *Graphika*, September 2019. <https://graphika.com/reports/spamouflage/>

Guo Wengui, democratic demonstrations in Hong Kong, and issues of tension in US-China relations. With regard to the pandemic, the network's posts promoted Chinese successes and US failures. When looking at the network in the context of the Hong Kong protests, Graphika identified it as "an active and prolific, but ultimately low-impact, cross-platform political spam network," apparently "designed to support the Chinese government and discredit its critics, both at home and abroad."¹⁵¹

In overlaps with Spamouflage, a joint investigation by BBC News and the research collective Bellingcat in May 2020 revealed a cluster of 1,000 Twitter accounts, 53 Facebook pages, 61 Facebook accounts, and 187 YouTube channels boosting Chinese government positions.¹⁵² Despite a combined following of almost 100,000 on Twitter and Facebook and 10,000 subscribers on YouTube, engagement with its content mostly originated from within the network. Following the investigation, the identified accounts were largely removed by the platforms for violating rules against spam.

As Spamouflage has recalibrated to disseminate coronavirus-related narratives, the network registered limited successes in filtering through to organic conversations and achieved amplification from beyond its own circle. Changes included giving fake accounts a more personalized backstory to withstand superficial suspicions of phony activity and switching to hands-on management to make accounts blend in with the behavior of regular users. Posts pushed by the group showed close alignment with government messaging in their wording, openly reused official content, and recorded high engagement with Chinese government officials, including the Foreign Ministry's deputy spokesperson Zhao Lijian, who retweeted messages of synthetic accounts on several occasions. Although Graphika notes that they have no evidence that officials knowingly shared content posted by fabricated accounts. This alignment with official messaging, notwithstanding, Graphika noted in its latest reporting in March 2021 that, in using these tactics, a small sample of accounts succeeded to break out of the bubble of

inauthentic amplification and generate genuine engagement.¹⁵³ Through these operational adjustments, the network garnered select yet high-profile amplification, among others, by Venezuela's Foreign Minister as well as by a couple of current and former politicians in Pakistan and the UK.

In a collaborative effort, Twitter, Facebook, and YouTube in August 2019 suspended accounts linked to a coordinated disinformation attempt targeting democratic protestors in Hong Kong.¹⁵⁴ The concerned accounts had been traced back to China. This collective takedown marked the first large-scale platform response to an influence operation with suspected ties to the Chinese state.¹⁵⁵ In June 2020, Twitter announced the removal of an integrated state-backed influence operation cluster.¹⁵⁶ The network comprised a set of 23,750 highly active accounts at the core, supported by a larger pool of approximately 150,000 accounts designed to further promote the activity of the core. In its statement attributing the activity to China, Twitter described the accounts as driving a "manipulative and coordinated" effort at "spreading geopolitical narratives favorable to the Communist Party of China". Predominantly posting in Mandarin and Cantonese, the messaging effort had been "caught early and failed to achieve considerable traction". Twitter assessed that the joint operation had been "strategically designed to artificially inflate impression metrics". In addition to this en masse takedown, Facebook, Twitter and YouTube have regularly suspended individual accounts associated with Spamouflage. Yet, the network has been able to rebuild assets almost in real time.¹⁵⁷

Takedowns like the one undertaken by Twitter in June 2020 demonstrate efforts at integrating a content-creating core and a satellite amplification network. This differentiated structure is integral to understanding how China has been anchoring its influence operations within the boundaries of platform rules and the limitations that social media companies have faced in tackling information operation networks by mainly shutting down assets based on "how" rather than "what" they promote online.

¹⁵¹ *Ibid.*

¹⁵² Benjamin Strick / Olga Robinson / Shayan Sardarizadeh, "Coronavirus: Inside the pro-China network targeting the US, Hong Kong and an exiled tycoon," *BBC*, 28.05.2020. <https://www.bbc.com/news/blogs-trending-52657434>

¹⁵³ Ben Nimmo / Ira Hubert / Yang Cheng, "Spamouflage Breakout," *Graphika*, February 2021. <https://graphika.com/reports/spamouflage-breakout/>

¹⁵⁴ Twitter Safety, "Information operations directed at Hong Kong," 19.08.2019, https://blog.twitter.com/en_us/topics/company/2019/information_operations_directed_at_Hong_Kong.html; Facebook, "Removing Coordinated Inauthentic Behavior From China," 19.08.2019, <https://about.fb.com/news/2019/08/removing-cib-china/>; Shane Huntley, "Maintaining the integrity of our platforms," Google Threat

Analysis Group, 22.08.2019. <https://www.blog.google/outreach-initiatives/public-policy/maintaining-integrity-our-platforms/>

¹⁵⁵ Permanent Select Committee on Intelligence of the US House of Representatives, *The China Deep Dive: A Report on the Intelligence Community's Capabilities and Competencies with Respect to the People's Republic of China*, unclassified summary, released on 30.09.2020. https://intelligence.house.gov/uploadedfiles/hpsci_china_deep_dive_redacted_summary_9.29.20.pdf

¹⁵⁶ Twitter Safety, "Disclosing networks of state-linked information operations we've removed," 12.06.2020. https://blog.twitter.com/en_us/topics/company/2020/information-operations-june-2020.html

¹⁵⁷ Ben Nimmo et al., "Return of the (Spamouflage) Dragon," *Graphika*, April 2020. <https://graphika.com/reports/return-of-the-spamouflage-dragon-1/>

Exploring the particular case of whether Zhao's two tweets in March received inauthentic amplification, a joint review by the Digital Forensic Research Lab at the Atlantic Council and the Associated Press showed limited signs of suspicious behavior that would suggest orchestrated reinforcement.¹⁵⁸ The bulk of interactions originated with members of China's diplomatic corps, state media outlets or the personal accounts of their staff.

Other tactics for breaking out of a self-contained bubble of synthetic engagement have included a shift to replying to posts from genuine users with larger followings, in an attempt to freeride on the wider attention. Ideally, these interactions drive up off-platform coverage. A pivot to foreign mainstream media through social media amplification is a high-value success – not only because of the outreach to audiences not active on social media but also because of its boost to perceptions within the broader public of the relevance held by featured narratives.

A report by the Institute for Strategic Dialogue and ASD in August 2020 analyzed a network of Twitter accounts tied to inauthentic and coordinated messaging related to influence attempts in the context of the pandemic, Taiwan independence, protests in Hong Kong, and Black Lives Matter demonstrations in the US.¹⁵⁹ Evaluating 445,570 tweets of these accounts, the researchers identified that replies accounted for close to 65 per cent of these posts and noted a marked uptick in replies following President Trump's attempts at branding the novel coronavirus as the "China virus". Replies from this network were directed at Trump alongside other US diplomats, Taiwan's President Tsai Ing-wen, as well as the Chinese editions of major news outlets, such as Voice of America, the BBC, Deutsche Welle, and *The New York Times*. In addition, the report highlighted reply-driven engagement of these accounts with those of CCP officials and Chinese state media. Interaction with these Chinese accounts revolved around positive reinforcement of official statements on China's coronavirus response and pushbacks against criticism from President Trump.

4 The Thin Red Line: Distinguishing Narrative Control from Disinformation

4.1 "Striking a Match in the Dark Night": China's Response to Disinformation Accusations

Senior Chinese officials have repeatedly characterized their assertive messaging as reaction to hostile narratives and misrepresentations of China's actions and policies in an effort to accord legitimacy to China's influence attempts by styling them as countermeasures.

In early 2021, Foreign Minister Wang Yi turned to this issue in an interview he gave to Xinhua and the China Media Group, to review China's diplomacy in 2020 and the wider international situation. Wang identified misconceptions of US policymakers about China as the main reason for tensions in bilateral relations.¹⁶⁰ This framing is presented frequently to justify narrative control as a way of correcting perspectives.

Professing China's commitment to information hygiene, Wang noted that China has "stood at the forefront of fighting misinformation, rebutting attempts of politicization and stigmatization." China was "determined to make sure that the objective narrative and collective memory of the battle against the pandemic would not be distorted by lies."¹⁶¹ Although the English translation of Wang's remark uses the term misinformation, which commonly refers to incomplete, misleading incorrect or otherwise damaging information that is circulated without deliberate intention of harm or influence, the totality of his comment would suggest that he did intend to include disinformation practices under this heading.

Director of the Central Foreign Affairs Commission and former ambassador to the US Yang Jiechi emphasized the same point in a speech in early February 2021 that assessed the state of US-China relations under the Biden administration. "[T]he Trump administration adopted misguided policies against China," Yang insisted, "plunging the relationship into its most difficult period since the establishment of diplomatic ties".¹⁶²

¹⁵⁸ For an in-depth analysis of the characteristics of the Twitter accounts engaging with Zhao's messaging see Bandeira et al., "Weaponized: How rumors about COVID-19's origins led to a narrative arms race," 37-39.

¹⁵⁹ Raymond Serrato / Bret Schafer, "Reply All: Inauthenticity and Coordinated Replying in Pro-Chinese Communist Party Twitter Networks," *Institute for Strategic Dialogue*, August 2020. <https://www.isdglobal.org/isd-publications/reply-all-inauthenticity->

[and-coordinated-replying-in-pro-chinese-communist-party-twitter-networks/](#)

¹⁶⁰ Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the PRC, "State Councilor and Foreign Minister Wang Yi Gives Interview".

¹⁶¹ *Ibid.*

¹⁶² Yang Jiechi, speech before the National Committee on US-China Relations, 2 February 2021, Beijing. https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/wjdt_665385/zyjh_665391/t1850362.shtml

More than a month before his tweets received fact-checking labels, *The Global Times* quotes Zhao Lijian justifying his misleading messages by saying, “[t]he questions raised on my personal Twitter account are a response to US politicians’ stigmatization of China, which also reflects the righteous anger of many Chinese people over these stigmatizing acts”. *The Global Times* article concludes by claiming that “Zhao’s decision to fight back on social media was praised by the Chinese public as a ‘smart move’ by using American officials’ tactics against them.”¹⁶³

The conspiracy that the coronavirus leaked from a lab run by the US military at Fort Detrick, which Zhao fueled with his tweets, is a specific example for China’s claim that its messaging is primarily a reaction. Zhao’s posts followed articles in conservative news outlets, including the *Washington Times*, that baselessly suggested the virus might have been engineered by China as a bioweapon.¹⁶⁴

In an interview with *The Global Times*, He Weiwen, a former economic and commercial counselor at the Chinese Consulate General in San Francisco and New York, indicated that expectations in Beijing of a fundamental change in policy under the new US administration were dim. “[T]he Biden administration’s call for ‘strategic patience’¹⁶⁵ did not signal its intent to repair the seriously damaged bilateral ties, but instead give itself more time to come up with a better strategy to take on China, after Trump’s approach not only failed to contain China’s rise but also sent the US in a downward spiral.”¹⁶⁶

Answering to a question about a takedown by Twitter in June of roughly 170,000 seed and amplifier accounts linked to China, Hua Chunying, the leading spokesperson for China’s Foreign Ministry, deflected and selectively highlighted messages around China’s efforts in containing the outbreak. Hua, challenged that, “to equate plaudits for China’s epidemic response with disinformation is clearly untenable, unless we redefine ‘disinformation’,” likening messages from the deleted account cluster as genuine expression of support.¹⁶⁷ Twitter, by contrast, identified the suspended accounts to have engaged in “manipulative and coordinated activities” to spread “geopolitical narratives favorable to the Communist Party”.¹⁶⁸

Explaining the increasingly frequent use of Twitter by Chinese diplomats, Hua suggested that Chinese diplomats had a responsibility to “speak in a

truthful, objective and impartial manner” on certain foreign social media platforms that were “fraught with lies and rumors against China”. Engaging to enhance accuracy – as far as government positions are concerned – would be “like striking a match in the dark night to bring some light”. Recognizing the limits of plausible deniability, Hua sought to create a false equivalence between China’s coordinated narrative control efforts and the public diplomacy outreach of foreign officials in noting that foreign diplomats and journalists had also taken to Chinese platforms, such as WeChat and Weibo.

Continuing this false equivalence, Hua challenged that, if tweets commending China’s fight against the pandemic were classified as disinformation and involved accounts suspended, the same measures should apply to messages that “undeniably smeared China with malicious intentions”. Inaction would be “the perfect example of ideological prejudice, bias against China, blatant double standards,” confusing right and wrong. Hua offered that “[w]hat should be shut down is precisely the accounts that attack and smear China in an organized and coordinated manner.” This portrayal actively leverages the distinction between “narrative control” and “disinformation” to discredit Twitter’s efforts.

4.2 Blunting the Edge: International Responses to China’s IO Tactics

International responses to China’s influence efforts set an important precedent for what is permissible behavior in times of crisis. Such rules of behavior may also define the course for what tactics will be mainstreamed into states’ practice when the pandemic has been overcome. As a high-level example, the Netherlands in their response to the pre-draft report of Open-ended Working Group (OEWG), which deliberates on the boundaries of responsible behavior in cyberspace, proposed that “cyber enabled information operations that intervene with, for example national crisis response mechanisms during a health crisis, could, depending on

¹⁶³ Global Times, “Outspoken Chinese diplomat says tweet on COVID-19 origin was response to US stigmatization of China,” 07.04.2020. <https://www.globaltimes.cn/content/1184903.shtml>

¹⁶⁴ For a detailed description of US and Chinese messaging along this narrative rift, see Bandeira et al., “Weaponized: How rumors about COVID-19’s origins led to a narrative arms race”.

¹⁶⁵ White House, *Press Briefing by Press Secretary Jen Psaki*, 25 January 2021. <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/press-briefings/2021/01/25/press-briefing-by-press-secretary-jen-psaki-january-25-2021/>

¹⁶⁶ Yang Sheng / Wang Cong / Li Xuanmin, “China urges Biden to correct Trump policy, as US sends negative signals,” *Global Times*, 26.01.2021. <https://www.globaltimes.cn/page/202101/1214048.shtml>

¹⁶⁷ Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the PRC, *Regular Press Conference*, 12 June 2020. https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/xwfw_665399/s2510_665401/2511_665403/t1788415.shtml

¹⁶⁸ Twitter Safety, “Disclosing networks of state-linked information operations we’ve removed”.

the circumstances, be qualified as violation of international law.”¹⁶⁹

A range of countries have specifically responded to China's influence operation tactics to narrow the playing field.

China's practice of enlisting state-funded media organizations in official messaging to amplify its reach has met with consequences in the US. Select news organizations were required to register as foreign missions to reflect their direct coordination of messaging with Chinese officials – making them active participants in influence operations.

In 2020, the State Department on three separate occasions identified Chinese media organizations as foreign missions.¹⁷⁰ In its justification for the foreign mission designation, the State Department referred to Xi Jinping's remarks at the News and Public Opinion Work Conference in 2016, in which Xi told state media organizations that “[a]ll the work by the party's media must reflect the party's will,” emphasizing that they must “closely align themselves with the party in thought, politics, and action”.¹⁷¹

Foreign missions under the Foreign Missions Act are defined as “substantially owned or effectively controlled by a foreign government”¹⁷² and obliged to disclose a list of current employees in the US, share future employment decisions, report any property holdings – rented or owned – to the State Department,

and are required to request advance permission to acquire any new property in the US.

Reportedly, the US Department of Justice (DoJ), already requested in 2018 that two of the 15 organizations designated by the State Department – Xinhua News Agency and CGTN – register under the more rigorous regulatory regime of the Foreign Agents Registration Act (FARA).¹⁷³ Additional requirements under the FARA authority include disclosure of the foreign agent's relationship with the foreign principal (i.e. a foreign government/party or any other entity primarily organized in another country), as well as related finances and activities. The latter in particular include political activities¹⁷⁴ and acts as public agent¹⁷⁵ or information service employee,¹⁷⁶ if carried out at the direction or under the control of a foreign principal.

Of particular relevance to media organizations, FARA disclosure obligations encompass filing and labeling requirements for political propaganda. Any information material circulated to more than two people, in or for the interest of a foreign principal, needs to be submitted to the Attorney General within 48 hours of dissemination.¹⁷⁷ In addition, such communications in or for the interest of a foreign principal need to be highlighted by “a conspicuous statement that the materials are distributed by the agent on behalf of the foreign principal”.¹⁷⁸

¹⁶⁹ Kingdom of the Netherlands, *Response to the pre-draft report of the OEWG*, April 2020. <https://front.un-arm.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/kingdom-of-the-netherlands-response-pre-draft-oewg.pdf>

¹⁷⁰ Tranche 1, announced on 18 February 2020, identified Xinhua, CGTN, China Radio International, China Daily Distribution Corporation and Hai Tian Development as foreign missions. US Department of State, *Senior State Department Officials On the Office of Foreign Mission's Designation of Chinese Media Entities as Foreign Missions*, 18.02.2020. <https://2017-2021.state.gov/senior-state-department-officials-on-the-office-of-foreign-missions-designation-of-chinese-media-entities-as-foreign-missions//index.html>

Tranche 2, announced on 22 June 2020, added determinations for China News Service, China Central Television (CCTV), the People's Daily, and the Global Times as foreign missions. US Department of State, *Briefing With Assistant Secretary for East Asian and Pacific Affairs David R. Stilwell On Designating Additional PRC State Media Entities as Foreign Missions*, 22.06.2020. <https://2017-2021.state.gov/briefing-with-assistant-secretary-for-east-asian-and-pacific-affairs-david-r-stilwell-on-designating-additional-prc-state-media-entities-as-foreign-missions//index.html>; US Department of State, *Designation of Additional Chinese Media Entities as Foreign Missions*, Press Statement, 22.06.2020. <https://2017-2021.state.gov/designation-of-additional-chinese-media-entities-as-foreign-missions//index.html>

Tranche 3, announced on 21 October 2020, extended the listing to Yicai Global, Jiefang Daily, Xinmin Evening News, Social Sciences in China Press, Beijing Review, and Economic Daily. US Department of State, *Designation of Additional PRC Propaganda Outlets as Foreign Missions*, Press Statement, 21.10.2020. <https://2017-2021.state.gov/designation-of-additional-prc-propaganda-outlets-as-foreign-missions/index.html>

¹⁷¹ US Department of State, *Briefing With Assistant Secretary for East Asian and Pacific Affairs David R. Stilwell*.

¹⁷² Foreign Missions Act, Title 22 US Code § 4302.3. <https://2009-2017.state.gov/documents/organization/202926.pdf>

¹⁷³ Kate O'Keeffe / Aruna Viswanatha, “Justice Department Has Ordered Key Chinese State Media Firms to Register as Foreign Agents,” *Wall Street Journal*, 18.09.2018. <https://www.wsj.com/articles/justice-department-has-ordered-key-chinese-state-media-firms-to-register-as-foreign-agents-1537296756>; US Department of Justice, *Obligation of CGTN America to Register under the Foreign Agents Registration Act*, 20.12.2018. <https://int.nyt.com/data/documenthelper/638-doj-letter-cgtn/b852f4eae0647820f27e/optimized/full.pdf#page=1>

¹⁷⁴ Such as actions that may “influence any agency or official of the Government of the United States or any section of the public within the United States with reference to formulating, adopting, or changing the domestic or foreign policies of the United States or with reference to the political or public interests, policies, or relations of a government of a foreign country or a foreign political party”. See Title 22 US Code §611 (o).

¹⁷⁵ Such as “the publication or dissemination of oral, visual, graphic, written, or pictorial information or matter of any kind, including publication by means of advertising, books, periodicals, newspapers, lectures, broadcasts, motion pictures, or otherwise.” See Title 22 US Code §611 (h).

¹⁷⁶ Such as engagement in “furnishing, disseminating, or publishing accounts, descriptions, information, or data with respect to the political, industrial, employment, economic, social, cultural, or other benefits, advantages, facts, or conditions of any country other than the United States or of any government of a foreign country or of a foreign political party”. See Title 22 US Code §611 (i).

¹⁷⁷ Title 22 US Code §614 (a). <https://www.law.cornell.edu/uscode/text/22/614>.

¹⁷⁸ Title 22 US Code §614 (b). <https://www.law.cornell.edu/uscode/text/22/614>.

FARA carves out exceptions for news services as long as they are to at least 80 per cent owned by a US citizen who themselves are not required to register as foreign agent or are otherwise financially or operationally beholden to a foreign principal.¹⁷⁹ Yet as DoJ orders to Xinhua and CGTN to register as foreign agents indicate, in the view of the US government they no longer meet these criteria. According to the DoJ, this special treatment of media outlets is lifted and obligations to register under FARA become effective if “there is an effort by the state-controlled media organization to use its reporting in the United States to target an audience here for purposes of perception management or to influence U.S. policy”.¹⁸⁰

FARA filing registries show that CGTN¹⁸¹ acted on the DoJ order and registered as foreign agent in August 2019. Until 5 May 2021, none of the other media organizations identified as foreign missions had taken additional steps to register under FARA following their designation by the State Department,¹⁸² when Xinhua North America eventually filed its registration as foreign agent – three years after the DoJ first advised it to do so.¹⁸³ The only other two entities currently registered under FARA are the China Daily Distribution Corporation,¹⁸⁴ responsible for the printing, delivery and promotion of the CCP's English-language newspaper *China Daily* in North America, and Hai Tian Development USA,¹⁸⁵ which distributes the CCP's official newspaper, *The People's Daily*. The two organizations started submitting FARA filings in 1983 and 1996, respectively.

FARA requirements can enhance transparency that curtails advertisement opportunities as the experience of *China Daily* shows. As part of its filing obligations as registered foreign agent, *China Daily* had declared lump-sum figures for “total cost of goods sold” and “operation expenses” in the past but has failed to produce financial statements about how much the outlet had paid to place its “China Watch” paid supplements in US newspapers. While inserts are labeled as advertising supplements and are identified as “supplement prepared by *China Daily*, People's Republic of China”¹⁸⁶, these lift-outs are styled to fit in with the news reporting of the carrying publication, when their stories are selected and framed to project a decidedly positive image of China and the Communist Party. Following accusations by Republican lawmakers in early 2020 that *China Daily* fell short of reporting on its obligations under FARA in full detail,¹⁸⁷ the organization for the first time disclosed an itemized breakdown of payments to US news outlets for “China Watch” inserts.

Based on its FARA filings, *China Daily* paid *The Wall Street Journal* nearly 6 million USD, *The Washington Post* almost 4.6 million USD, *The New York Times* 50,000 USD, and Twitter more than 260,000 USD in the period from November 2016 to April 2020.¹⁸⁸

The New York Times stated to have stopped running advertorials from state media at the beginning of 2020.¹⁸⁹ Twitter changed its policies already in August 2019 and no longer accepts advertising from state-controlled media organizations.¹⁹⁰ The financial reporting submitted as part of *China Daily's* first

¹⁷⁹ Title 22 US Code §611 (d).

<https://www.law.cornell.edu/uscode/text/22/611>

¹⁸⁰ O'Keeffe / Viswanatha, “Justice Department Has Ordered Key Chinese State Media Firms to Register as Foreign Agents”; see also: Title 22 US Code §611 (o), <https://www.law.cornell.edu/uscode/text/22/611>.

¹⁸¹ US Department of Justice, *Filings by MediaLinks TV, LLC/ CCTV as Active Registrant under FARA*, Registration no.6633. https://efile.fara.gov/ords/fara/f?p=1381:200:21081015373470::RP,200:P200_REG_NUMBER:6633

¹⁸² US Department of Justice, *Active FARA Registrants by Country – China*, accessed 26.07.2021. https://efile.fara.gov/ords/fara/f?p=1381:11:17280012404022::NO::P11_CNTRY:CH

¹⁸³ US Department of Justice, *Filings by Xinhua News Agency North America as Active Registrant under FARA*, Registration no.6958. https://efile.fara.gov/ords/fara/f?p=1381:200:17280012404022::RP,200:P200_REG_NUMBER,P200_COUNTRY:6958,CHINA

¹⁸⁴ US Department of Justice, *Filings by China Daily Distribution Corporation as Active Registrant under FARA*, Registration no.3457. https://efile.fara.gov/ords/fara/f?p=1381:200:8617362018065::RP,200:P200_REG_NUMBER:3457

¹⁸⁵ US Department of Justice, *Filings by Hai Tian Development U.S.A., Inc. as Active Registrant under FARA*, Registration no.5143. https://efile.fara.gov/ords/fara/f?p=1381:200:11396524722676::RP,200:P200_REG_NUMBER:5143

¹⁸⁶ See, for instance, supplements included in newspapers that then belonged to the Australian Fairfax Media group on 27 May 2016 (https://www.abc.net.au/mediawatch/transcripts/1619_chinawatch.j

pg) and the Washington Post on 29 November 2018 (https://pbs.twimg.com/media/DtNQIE_WoAE1B4H?format=jpg&name=large). In early December 2020, the group, which had merged with Nine Entertainment in 2018 to form Australia's largest media company, decided to stop carrying the inserts and end its arrangement with China Daily. Amanda Meade, “Nine Entertainment newspapers quit carrying China Watch supplement,” *Guardian*, 08.12.2020.

<https://www.theguardian.com/media/2020/dec/09/nine-entertainment-newspapers-quit-carrying-china-watch-supplement>

¹⁸⁷ Tom Cotton et al., Letter to US Attorney General William Barr, 6 February 2020.

<https://www.hawley.senate.gov/sites/default/files/2020-02/Hawley-Cotton-Banks-Letter-DOJ-China-Daily.pdf>

¹⁸⁸ China Daily Distribution Corp., *Amendment to Registration Statement Pursuant to the Foreign Agents Registration Act of 1938*, 06.01.2020. <https://efile.fara.gov/docs/3457-Amendment-20200601-2.pdf>

¹⁸⁹ Mo Yu, “US Spending Report Sheds Light on China's Global Propaganda Campaign,” *Voice of America*, 26.06.2020. <https://www.voanews.com/east-asia-pacific/voa-news-china/us-spending-report-sheds-light-chinas-global-propaganda-campaign>

¹⁹⁰ Twitter, “Updating our advertising policies on state media,” 19.08.2019. https://blog.twitter.com/en_us/topics/company/2019/advertising_policies_on_state_media.html

comprehensive filing indicated that payments to *The New York Times*, *The Washington Post*, and Twitter have indeed ceased. Subsequent FARA filings have shown that *The Wall Street Journal* continued to run advertisement for *China Daily* at least up until June 2020.¹⁹¹

In the UK, the Office of Communications (Ofcom), which regulates the broadcasting and telecommunication industries, revoked the license for CGTN in February 2021. The decision followed a yearlong investigation triggered by questions whether Star China Media Limited (SCML), the company holding CGTN's license, was able to exercise editorial control over the program – a key condition for a broadcasting license to be issued. In its enquiry, Ofcom concluded that SCML operated as the distributor of CGTN's services in the UK rather than as their direct provider. An application to transfer the license to the actual provider, China Global Television Network Corporation (CGTNC), was denied by Ofcom for similar reasons related to limitations in editorial responsibility. Ofcom assessed that CGTNC could not reasonably be expected to exercise independent control because its sole shareholder, the state-owned broadcaster CCTV, was in turn controlled by the CCP. Under its UK license, CGTN had also been able to broadcast across the EU under the Audiovisual Media Services Directive and large parts of Europe thanks to freedom of reception provisions under the European Convention on Transfrontier Television (ECTT) drawn up by the Council of Europe.¹⁹² As CGTN remained established in the UK as one of the ECTT's parties, the Convention allowed CGTN to continue to broadcast across large parts of Europe when the UK left the EU.

Even as CGTN's broadcasting license was withdrawn, the network could continue to provide its content to UK- and EU-based audiences via YouTube and social media. The disruption of CGTN's traditional transmission system will assign additional importance to these platforms as distribution channels. This expected migration to social media exemplifies the need to

consider regulatory restrictions across platforms and to anticipate displacement effects that may result from regulatory action if users are to be enabled to identify state-controlled reporting.

The importance of assessing regulatory efficacy is further underscored by CGTN's rebound attempts. On 3 March 2021, CGTN obtained confirmation that it could resume broadcasting under the jurisdiction of the Conseil Supérieur de l'Audiovisuel (CSA) in France, given that CGTN has been broadcasting its programs across Europe using an uplink of the French operator Eutelsat since 2016. No prior approval by the regulator was required for this switch. In its notice, the CSA, however, emphasized that CGTN's operations will be subject to the Law on Freedom of Communication, which prohibits incitement to hatred and violence and guarantees respect for human dignity as well as the honesty, independence and pluralism of information. Serious breaches of some of these principles have led the Council to issue a formal notice to Eutelsat to stop broadcasting non-European channels in the past. The CSA stressed that, in accordance with its missions, it will exercise particular attention "to ensure that CGTN respects these legal requirements".¹⁹³ The same freedom of reception rules that allowed CGTN to broadcast across all ECTT parties by virtue of its Ofcom license, now allow CGTN to broadcast to the UK from French jurisdiction despite Ofcom having revoked its license.

Following the example of Australia,¹⁹⁴ the EU has set up a special committee for further study of influence operation tactics to inform an appropriate policy response. The Special Committee on Foreign Interference in all Democratic Processes in the European Union, including Disinformation (INGE) was set up by the European Parliament (EP) on 18 June 2020.¹⁹⁵ Since it first convened in September, the committee's work has solicited views from platform representatives as well as institutional and independent experts on priority threats and opportunities for collaboration.¹⁹⁶

¹⁹¹ China Daily Distribution Corp., *Supplemental Statement Pursuant to the Foreign Agents Registration Act of 1938*, 18.11.2020. <https://efile.fara.gov/docs/3457-Supplemental-Statement-20201118-33.pdf>

¹⁹² *Directive (EU) 2018/1808 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 14 November 2018 amending Directive 2010/13/EU (Audiovisual Media Services Directive)*, <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/eli/dir/2018/1808/oj>; *European Convention on Transfrontier Television of 1989*, Art.4. <https://www.coe.int/en/web/conventions/full-list/-/conventions/rms/090000168007b0d8>

¹⁹³ CSA, "La chaîne CGTN relève, pour sa diffusion en Europe, de la compétence de la France," 03.03.2021. <https://www.csa.fr/Informateur/Espace-presse/Communiqués-de-presse/La-chaîne-CGTN-releve-pour-sa-diffusion-en-Europe-de-la-compétence-de-la-France>

¹⁹⁴ In December 2019, the Parliament of Australia established a Select Committee on Foreign Interference through Social Media. Expert

submissions are available online at:

https://www.aph.gov.au/Parliamentary_Business/Committees/Senate/Foreign_Interference_through_Social_Media/ForeignInterference/Submissions; alongside transcripts of past hearings: https://www.aph.gov.au/Parliamentary_Business/Committees/Senate/Foreign_Interference_through_Social_Media/ForeignInterference/Public_Hearings.

¹⁹⁵ European Parliament, *Decision of 18 June 2020 on setting up a special committee on foreign interference in all democratic processes in the European Union, including disinformation, and defining its responsibilities, numerical strength and term of office (2020/2683(RSO))*. https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/TA-9-2020-0161_EN.html

¹⁹⁶ Special Committee on Foreign Interference in all Democratic Processes in the European Union, including Disinformation, *Meeting Documents*, accessed 26.07.2021. <https://emeeting.europarl.europa.eu/emeeting/committee/en/archives/INGE>

The EP Decision that created INGE sets a broad remit for the committee. Disinformation campaigns are one focus area for which the committee is tasked with devising an integrated and sustainable approach to address foreign interference. Besides this responsibility, the committee looks into responses to cyber-attacks targeting critical infrastructure, direct and indirect financial support and economic coercion.¹⁹⁷ With respect to disinformation campaigns, INGE's consultations have focused on the role of government and social media companies in raising awareness and countering interference attempts, with the explicit mandate to explore the need for legislative action and identify possible issues for intervention by social media companies. Notably, the committee is tasked with conceiving countermeasures that address the involvement of domestic actors and organizations in foreign interference efforts that have the potential to impede a common EU position – a vector that China has been using to weaken the combined strength of the bloc.

At a hearing of the committee on 1 March 2021, HR/VP Borrell pointed out that the EEAS had been lacking a specific mandate to study disinformation from China, the kind of which it had received with respect to Russia and the Western Balkans.¹⁹⁸ In particular, Borrell noted the service's tight resources for fighting disinformation coming from China, as a result of the absence of any explicit tasking by the European Council on Chinese-sponsored influence operations. Borrell made clear that the EEAS would welcome such a mandate but would also require additional means to implement it.¹⁹⁹

4.3 Redrawing the Edge: Platform Responses to China's IO Tactics

On 4 June 2020, Facebook started implementing earlier plans for labeling Russian, Chinese and other state-controlled media organizations that are either partially

or entirely under the editorial control of governments.²⁰⁰ Ads purchased by organizations from this category were scheduled to receive similar labels later in 2020. On the same occasion, Facebook announced that it would start blocking said state-controlled media organizations from buying ads in the US – “out of an abundance of caution” ahead of the elections in November. That change became effective on 17 June. The company added that state-run outlets rarely advertised in the US.

Following Facebook's announcements, a spokesperson for China's Foreign Ministry raised the role the media plays for global information flows and enhanced mutual understanding, in line with the official characterization that China's narrative push is intended to present China's side of the story.²⁰¹ The spokesperson called upon Facebook to “rise above its ideological bias and look at the roles of all countries' media”.

In August 2019, Twitter ended the possibilities for media organizations that are financially or editorially controlled by states to sponsor ads or to pay to promote content on its platform.²⁰² Shortly thereafter, the social media company decided to no longer accept or run political advertisements from candidates, political parties, and government officials.²⁰³ In August 2020, Twitter expanded its labeling for political accounts. Under the updated policy, Twitter has been appending notifications to both accounts belonging to state-controlled media entities and their senior staff as well as the accounts of senior government officials, including foreign ministers, ambassadors, spokespeople, and key diplomatic representatives. In a first step, Twitter introduced these labels for entities and representatives of the five permanent UN Security Council members. Twitter expanded this list on 11 February 2021 to the accounts of the G7 countries and included a core set of countries to which Twitter has traced state-connected influence operations.²⁰⁴ Going further than other platforms in identifying accounts affiliated with state media, Twitter has also applied labels to high-profile personal accounts connected to tagged outlets.²⁰⁵ For

¹⁹⁷ European Parliament, *Decision of 18 June 2020 on setting up a special committee on foreign interference*.

¹⁹⁸ Special Committee on Foreign Interference in all Democratic Processes in the European Union, including Disinformation, *Exchange of views with Josep Borrell, Vice-President of the European Commission/High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy*, 1 March 2021, video, 16:56:43. https://multimedia.europarl.europa.eu/en/special-committee-on-foreign-interference-in-all-democratic-processes-in-european-union-including-di_20210301-1615-COMMITTEE-INGE_vd

¹⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, 16:57:04.

²⁰⁰ Nathaniel Gleicher, “Labeling State-Controlled Media On Facebook,” *Facebook*, 04.06.2020. <https://about.fb.com/news/2020/06/labeling-state-controlled-media/>

²⁰¹ Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the PRC, *Regular Press Conference*, 5 June 2020.

https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/xwfw_665399/s2510_665401/t1786290.shtml

²⁰² Twitter, “Updating our advertising policies on state media”.

²⁰³ jack (@jack), “We’ve made the decision to stop all political advertising on Twitter globally. We believe political message reach should be earned, not bought. Why? A few reasons...,” *twitter.com*, 30.10.2019, <https://twitter.com/jack/status/1189634360472829952>; Twitter, “Political Content,” accessed 26.07.2021, <https://business.twitter.com/en/help/ads-policies/ads-content-policies/political-content.html>.

²⁰⁴ This list of phase-two countries encompasses Canada, Cuba, Ecuador, Egypt, Germany, Honduras, Indonesia, Iran, Italy, Japan, Saudi Arabia, Serbia, Spain, Thailand, Turkey, and the United Arab Emirates.

²⁰⁵ Owen Churchill, “Why are Twitter ‘China state media’ labels only applied to Chinese employees?,” *South China Morning Post*, 15.04.2021.

Chinese media organizations, this practice has so far almost exclusively been extended to Chinese staff. One prominent exception appeared to be the account of the CGTN program “Closer to China,” hosted by the American Robert Kuhn, that had centrally featured his image. However, according to Kuhn, the account was actually managed by CGTN directly rather than himself.²⁰⁶ The photo of Kuhn has since been replaced by a non-descript show logo and the account itself has been marked as state-affiliated.

As part of its August 2020 policy revision, Twitter ceased to amplify the tweets and accounts of state-controlled media organizations through its recommendation system. This change has not been applied to the government accounts that are receiving labels disclosing their state affiliation.

Based on data collected by the China Media Project, in the 50 days after Twitter introduced the labeling practice, shares and likes of CGTN, Xinhua, and *People's Daily* fell by more than 20 per cent compared to the same period preceding the policy change.²⁰⁷

Anecdotally, the *Global Times* editor in chief, whose Twitter account also received state media labels because of his close institutional links, claimed that Twitter's measures severely reduced the stream of the approximately 1,000 new followers he used to be able to recruit for his account every day. Alarmed by the sudden drop-off, he voiced the concern that “Twitter will eventually choke [his] account” through these measures.²⁰⁸

Maffick, LLC, the parent company of the RT spin-off In the NOW, sued Facebook in response to the social media company's introduction of labels to mark state-controlled media organizations. Through its lawsuit, Maffick seeks damages and an injunction for the label Facebook assigned In the NOW, alleging that, “Maffick's ability to generate views and reach and to monetize its social media pages is directly related to its reputation and goodwill as a reliable social media source, which are being irreparably harmed by Facebook's defamatory Notice.”²⁰⁹ Contrasting figures for May and July 2020, the months preceding and following Facebook's

decision to tag In the NOW as controlled by the Russian state, court documents submitted by Maffick claim that page views dropped by 73 per cent, its reach by 70 per cent, and monetization revenue by 85 per cent.²¹⁰

Though not part of a systematic assessment, these reports suggest that indications of state-control for media organizations that lack editorial independence can curtail online audiences at least in the short-term.

A series of studies conducted by disinformation researchers from George Washington University on the election coverage by Russian government-funded outlet RT has shown that labels which clearly address funding and potential control of media organizations by states can be successful in raising user awareness about possible state influence.²¹¹

4.4 Taking the Edge off: Implications of Social Media Bans

In a March 2020 letter to Twitter CEO Jack Dorsey, US Senator Ben Sasse (R-NE) and Congressman Mike Gallagher (R-WI) enquired about “Twitter's rationale for granting platform access to representatives of a government that helps organize the coordinated manipulation of content”.²¹² The two lawmakers also asked Twitter to remove accounts of Chinese diplomats that are “waging a massive propaganda campaign to rewrite the history of COVID-19 and whitewash the Party's lies to the Chinese people and the world”²¹³.

The letter places this request in a need for greater reciprocity, invoking that western diplomats and politicians had no comparable opportunity to address Chinese audiences through the same platform as Twitter access is barred in China and their use of domestic Chinese alternatives severely restricted. The same access restrictions, the letter notes, is denying the Chinese public any regular possibility to follow what messages Chinese officials propagate through these channels.

The first case of a permanent Twitter ban of a leading politician set a high bar for its exclusion. The suspension

<https://www.scmp.com/news/china/article/3129732/why-are-twitter-china-state-media-labels-only-applied-chinese-employees>

²⁰⁶ *Ibid.*

²⁰⁷ Kevin Schoenmakers / Claire Liu, “China's Telling Twitter Story,” *China Media Project*, 18.01.2021. <https://chinamediaproject.org/2021/01/18/chinas-telling-twitter-story/>

²⁰⁸ Hu Xijin 胡锡进 (@HuXijin_GT), “In addition to tagging my account with the ‘China state-affiliated media’ label, I don't know what Twitter has done to stop my account from receiving over 1000 new followers every day. I've even started to see more unfollows. It seems Twitter will eventually choke my account,” twitter.com, 14.08.2020. https://twitter.com/huxijin_gt/status/1294270048496791553

²⁰⁹ Reply by Plaintiff Maffick, LLC in Support of Ex Parte Application for Temporary Restraining Order and Order to Show Cause re

Preliminary Injunction, case 3:20-cv-05222-JD, document 17, 08.10.2020, 10. <https://de.scribd.com/document/472637321/Anissa-Naoui-Declaration-in-Facebook-Lawsuit>

²¹⁰ *Ibid.*

²¹¹ Jack Nassetta / Kimberly Gross, “State media warning labels can counteract the effects of foreign misinformation,” *Harvard Kennedy School Misinformation Review* (2020), Special Issue on US Elections and Disinformation. <https://doi.org/10.37016/mr-2020-45>

²¹² Ben Sasse / Mike Gallagher, *Letter to Twitter CEO Jack Dorsey*, 20.03.2020. https://www.sasse.senate.gov/public/_cache/files/830e7a6f-dc96-4987-b4e1-7d1d2a2f4908/03.20.20-sasse-gallagher-twitter-letter.pdf

²¹³ *Ibid.*

of the personal account of former President Trump on 8 January 2021 followed posts that Twitter assessed as inciting a violent insurrection and absence of a demonstrated willingness to use the account's reach on the platform to stop riots and to ensure a peaceful, orderly transition of power in the aftermath of the US presidential election.²¹⁴

Assessing the effect of Twitter's actions on the wider interactions on the platform, the social media intelligence company Signal Labs noted that incidents of misinformation percolating on Twitter declined by 73 per cent in the wake of the ban of Trump and core supporters.²¹⁵ The precise contribution the ban had on this drop is difficult to isolate, considering that other drivers of misinformation likely also abated over the same period. As the Wilson Center notes, "the Georgia run-off election, in which widespread election fraud was used as a talking point on the campaign trail, concluded, that the insurrection at the Capitol moved some Republicans to stop amplifying false allegations of voter fraud, the House and Senate voted to confirm President Biden's election victory, and Twitter removed around 70,000 QAnon and extremist-related smaller accounts."²¹⁶

Trump's ban from Twitter and Facebook marks a rare instance in which concern about harm outweighed newsworthiness considerations for an account of a senior official. Crucially, both Facebook and Twitter made this determination also with respect to the "risk of further incitement of violence" in the future.²¹⁷ The decision involving Trump must also be considered in the context of what precedent it sets for other, foreign, interference efforts, if these posts and accounts publishing and sharing them would be allowed to stay and operate on the platform unimpeded.

The implications remain a critical focus for further study. In March, Twitter launched a public survey on its approach to world leaders, specifically soliciting

views on whether platform rules should apply to prominent politicians without distinction and how to enforce rules in case of violations.²¹⁸ In early May, a spokesperson for the company announced that a record number of nearly 49,000 responses had been received.²¹⁹

Facebook referred the decision to permanently suspend Trump from its platforms to the Oversight Board (OB), an independent appeals body.²²⁰ On 5 May, the OB decided to uphold the restriction of Trump's access to publish on Facebook and Instagram, while clarifying that an indefinite suspension required a consistent policy on violations and penalties in line with the rules applied to other users.²²¹ In its ruling, the Board called on Facebook to establish clear standards for imposing a permanent ban. In direct relevance to policy exceptions that have given leeway to China's messaging network of official accounts, the Board recommended that Facebook set out criteria for applying the newsworthiness allowance and explain when it is used, in particular in cases involving political leaders and other influential public figures. In its response to the ruling, Facebook announced that going forward it will not treat posts from politicians any different than content from other users in considering their newsworthiness.²²² Under the new policy, the author of a post may still factor into Facebook's evaluation of whether the public interest in the content in question outweighs possible harm caused by it.²²³ But the company no longer presumes "that any person's speech is inherently newsworthy", including the posts of politicians. In this respect, the company is stepping away from the position that posts from politicians were, by their nature, of public interest. Furthermore, from 2022 onwards, Facebook will disclose when it applies its newsworthiness allowance.²²⁴ Analyzing the significance of newsworthiness exceptions for China's official messaging network, this report has shown the potential

²¹⁴ Twitter, "Permanent suspension of @realDonaldTrump," 08.01.2021. https://blog.twitter.com/en_us/topics/company/2020/suspension.html

²¹⁵ Elizabeth Dwoskin / Craig Timberg, "Misinformation dropped dramatically the week after Twitter banned Trump and some allies," *Washington Post*, 16.01.2021. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/technology/2021/01/16/misinformation-trump-twitter/>

²¹⁶ Nina Jankowicz / Zoë Kaufmann / Shannon Pierson, "This Week in Disinformation," *Wilson Center*, 25.11.2020. <https://www.wilsoncenter.org/sites/default/files/media/emails/0104020-20201125.html>

²¹⁷ Guy Rosen / Monika Bickert, "Our Response to the Violence in Washington," *Facebook*, 07.01.2021, <https://about.fb.com/news/2021/01/responding-to-the-violence-in-washington-dc/>; Twitter, "Permanent suspension of @realDonaldTrump".

²¹⁸ Twitter Safety, "Calling for public input on our approach to world leaders," 18.03.2021. https://blog.twitter.com/en_us/topics/company/2021/calling-for-public-input-on-our-approach-to-world-leaders

²¹⁹ Elizabeth Culliford, "Twitter hears from record respondents over world leader rules," *Reuters*, 04.05.2021. <https://www.reuters.com/technology/twitter-hears-record-respondents-over-world-leader-rules-2021-05-04/>

²²⁰ Nick Clegg, "Referring Former President Trump's Suspension From Facebook to the Oversight Board," *Facebook*, 21.01.2021. <https://about.fb.com/news/2021/01/referring-trump-suspension-to-oversight-board/>

²²¹ Oversight Board, *Case decision2021-001-FB-FBR*, 05.05.2021. <https://www.oversightboard.com/decision/FB-691QAMHJ>

²²² Facebook, "Facebook Responses to Oversight Board Recommendations in Trump Case," 04.06.2021. <https://about.fb.com/wp-content/uploads/2021/06/Facebook-Responses-to-Oversight-Board-Recommendations-in-Trump-Case.pdf>

²²³ Facebook Transparency Center, "Our approach to newsworthy content," updated 23.06.2021. <https://transparency.fb.com/features/approach-to-newsworthy-content/>

²²⁴ Facebook, "Facebook Responses to Oversight Board Recommendations in Trump Case".

effect that this change in policy may have on the continued ability to entrench harmful narratives.

5 Actual Control? Impact and Implications

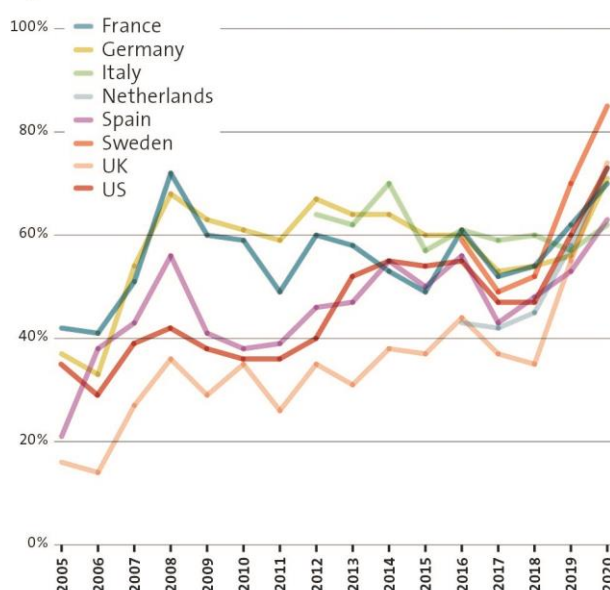
As noted in section 1 of this report, China's messaging campaigns during the pandemic are closely linked to its quest of reasserting control over influence operations now conducted by cyber-enabled means. To have any basis to gauge future developments, it is important to evaluate effects from the perspective of this experimental capability development and from the view of the objectives of their sponsors. Further escalation of these influence measures with the attempt to cause large-scale effects will depend on China's own assessment of its success in adapting cyber-enabled influence ops tactics to its preference of information control and of the cost it has incurred in the process.

5.1 Impact for the People: Public Opinion

In October 2020, Bethany Allen-Ebrahimian first reported for Axios on a high-ranking German official who in 2018 held back a sensitive intelligence report over concerns that it would damage commercial relations with China.²²⁵ Based on the descriptions of two former US intelligence officials, the report details efforts by the Chinese government to comprehensively influence representatives of Germany's government, society, and businesses – from the local to the federal level. In this context, the report is said to have raised concerns about interactions between German companies and the Chinese government. Predating tension of the coronavirus crisis, the incident testifies to how disruptive knowledge of these systematic influence attempts, let alone public statements on the topic, was considered to be. Notably, this assessment of possible disruption is quite independent from the effects of the influence efforts themselves. That a senior official accepted the risk of bad press on behalf of China in the event that the cover-up would be revealed underscores the disruptive potential ascribed to the report itself.

As survey data from the Pew Research Center shows, this move took place against the backdrop of a majority of the German public already holding unfavorable views of China at the time (54 per cent) – and so consistently since 2007.²²⁶ Unfavorable views on

Figure 1: Unfavorable Views of China



Source: Pew Research Center, Summer 2020 Global Attitudes Survey

China rose by 21 percentage points in 2007, the single-largest year-on-year change for Germany in almost two decades. This shift followed official Chinese protests in response to a private visit of the Dalai Lama to the German Chancellery that culminated in the temporary suspension of the Strategic Dialogue between the two foreign ministries, which had only been established the year prior.

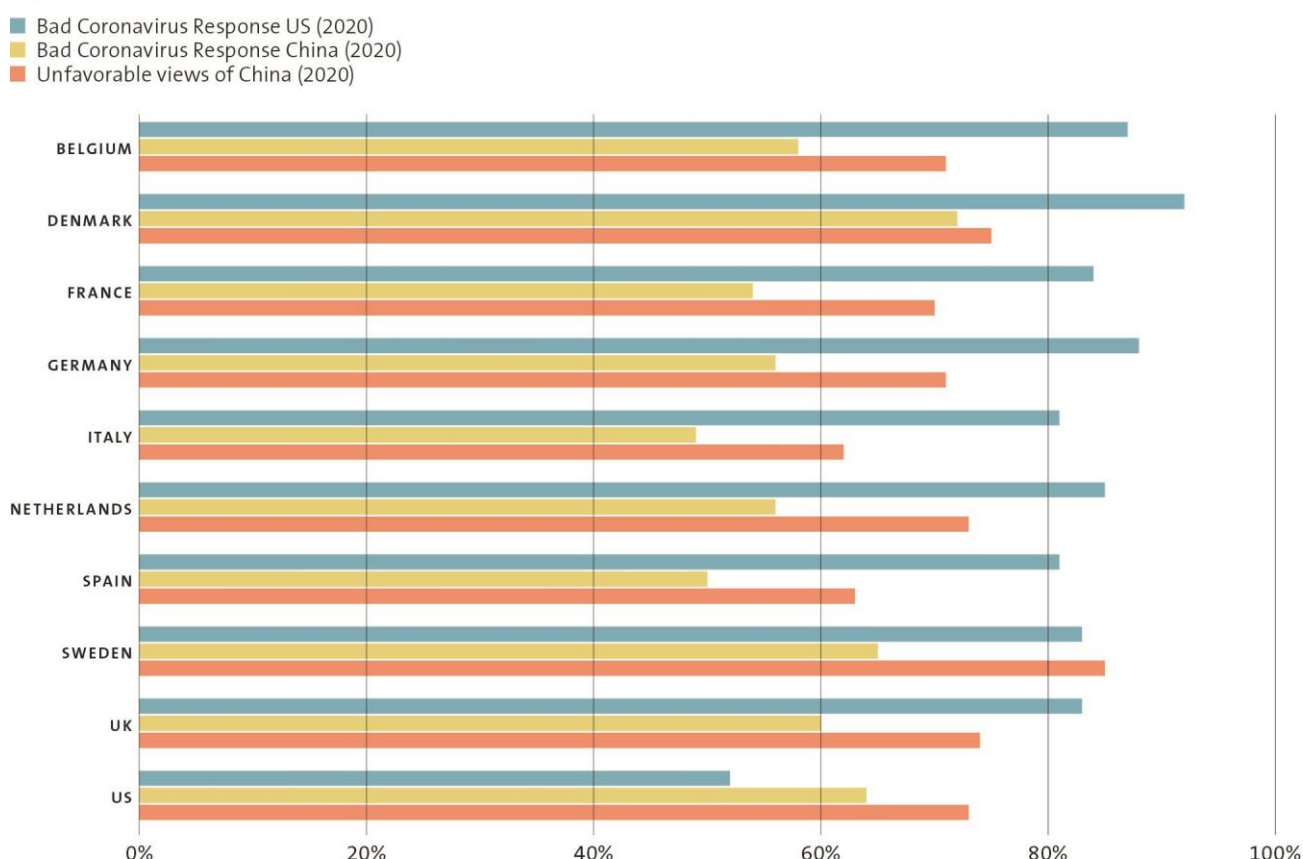
Based on survey data from the Pew Research Center, for a number of other European countries this singular increase in unfavorability ratings took place between 2019 and 2020 in the midst of the pandemic, including the UK (19 percentage points) and the Netherlands (15 percentage points). Sweden, Germany, and Spain recorded double-digit increases for the same period (see Figure 1).

In absolute terms China lost in favorability, though it is hard to assess conclusively solely on the basis of this survey data if influence had a cushioning effect on this downward trend or were detrimental, driving part of the deterioration in the international views of China's reputation.

A cushioning effect appears to be likely, when comparing views on China overall with views on how China managed the outbreak. While views on China's coronavirus response still are preponderantly negative, these figures are less negative than those for attitudes towards China in general (see Figure 2). This indication may be supported by the fact that older generations

²²⁵ Bethany Allen-Ebrahimian, "Exclusive: Top German official hushed up report on China's influence," *Axios*, 06.10.2020. <https://www.axios.com/exclusive-top-german-official-hushed-up-report-on-chinas-influence-8c6aeef3-0f71-405f-a902-a215399f2068.html>

²²⁶ Laura Silver / Kat Devlin / Christine Huang, "Unfavorable Views of China Reach Historic Highs in Many Countries," *Pew Research Center*, 06.10.2020. <https://www.pewresearch.org/global/2020/10/06/unfavorable-views-of-china-reach-historic-highs-in-many-countries/>

Figure 2: Public Attitudes Coronavirus Response

Source: Pew Research Center, Summer 2020 Global Attitudes Survey

hold significantly more negative views of China than younger generations (see Figure 3), considering the difference in media habits of the age groups and channels through which they learn about CCP activity. Where younger generations spend more time on social media, they would be more exposed to direct messaging from Chinese networks. Where older generations consume news through media channels that are more likely to filter and contextualize information, they would be less exposed to a narrative controlled by China without additional moderation.

While generally at low levels, those who had a positive opinion of China's coronavirus crisis management had both more positive views of China and stronger confidence in Xi Jinping's international leadership abilities (see Figure 4 and Figure 5). This correlation hints at the possibility that shaping perceptions around China's coronavirus response may have been a vector for positively influencing attitudes towards China and the CCP leadership in particular.

A relative comparison shows that, while respondents from European countries generally had a positive image of their own country, the WHO, and the

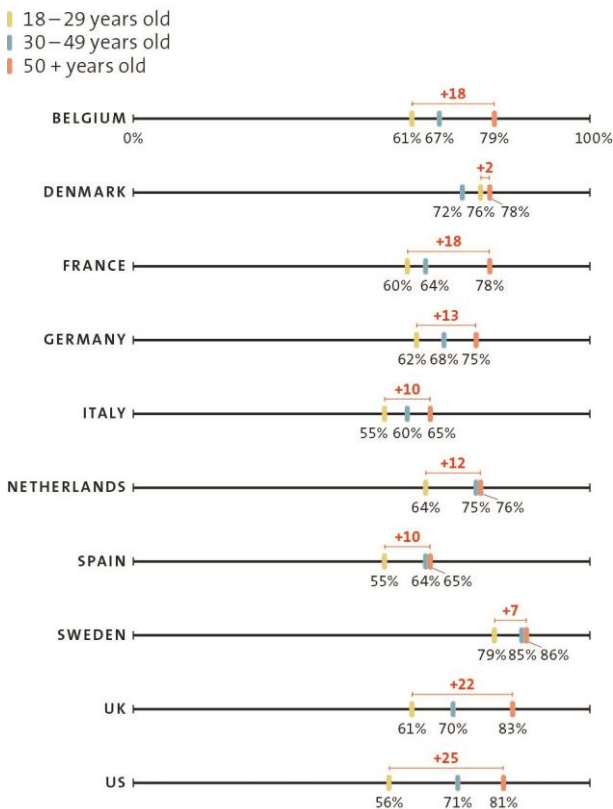
EU, and a negative view of China, the latter still eclipsed the US (see Figure 2). This relative lead over the US may still be seen as vindication by proponents of China's assertive approach to narrative control.

The strategic engineers behind these operations may well be aware and prepared to accept trade-offs that come with short-term favorability losses but promise long-term gains. While hurting its image of a responsible stakeholder and ambitions to develop soft power, China's assertive messaging may in turn reinforce perceptions of dependency that offer a more reliable mechanism of control. Charles Parton, a former career diplomat who served in mainland China and Hong Kong, and was a Special Advisor on China for the UK Parliament's Foreign Affairs Committee, submitted that, "[c]reating the perception of dependency allows threats to work. It fertilises the soil in which unacceptable behaviour and interference thrive."²²⁷

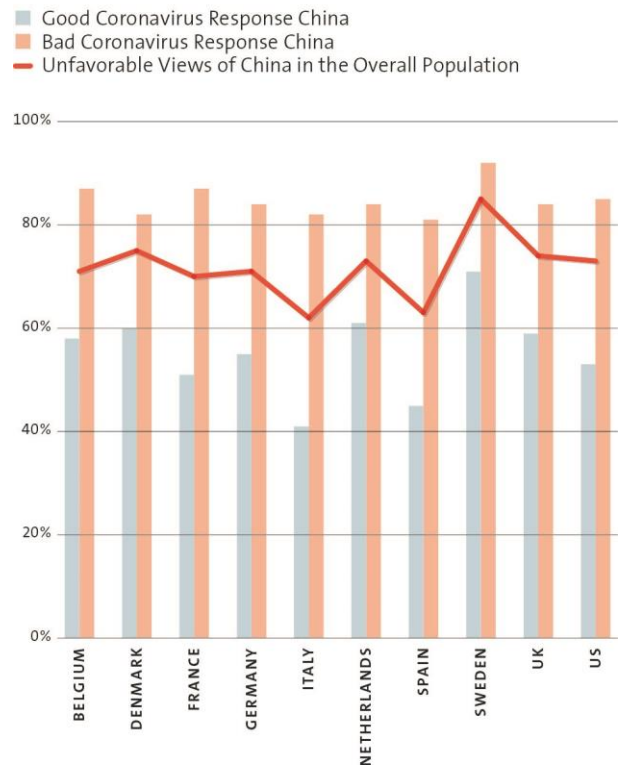
²²⁷ Charles Parton, "China has a strategy and Britain doesn't," *Standpoint*, 25.03.2020. <https://standpointmag.co.uk/china-has-a-strategy-and-britain-doesnt/>

Figure 3: Attitudes towards China by Age Group

Percentage share of those with an unfavorable view of China



Source: Pew Research Center, Summer 2020 Global Attitudes Survey

Figure 4: Share of Unfavorable Attitudes towards China by View of China's Coronavirus Response

Source: Pew Research Center, Summer 2020 Global Attitudes Survey

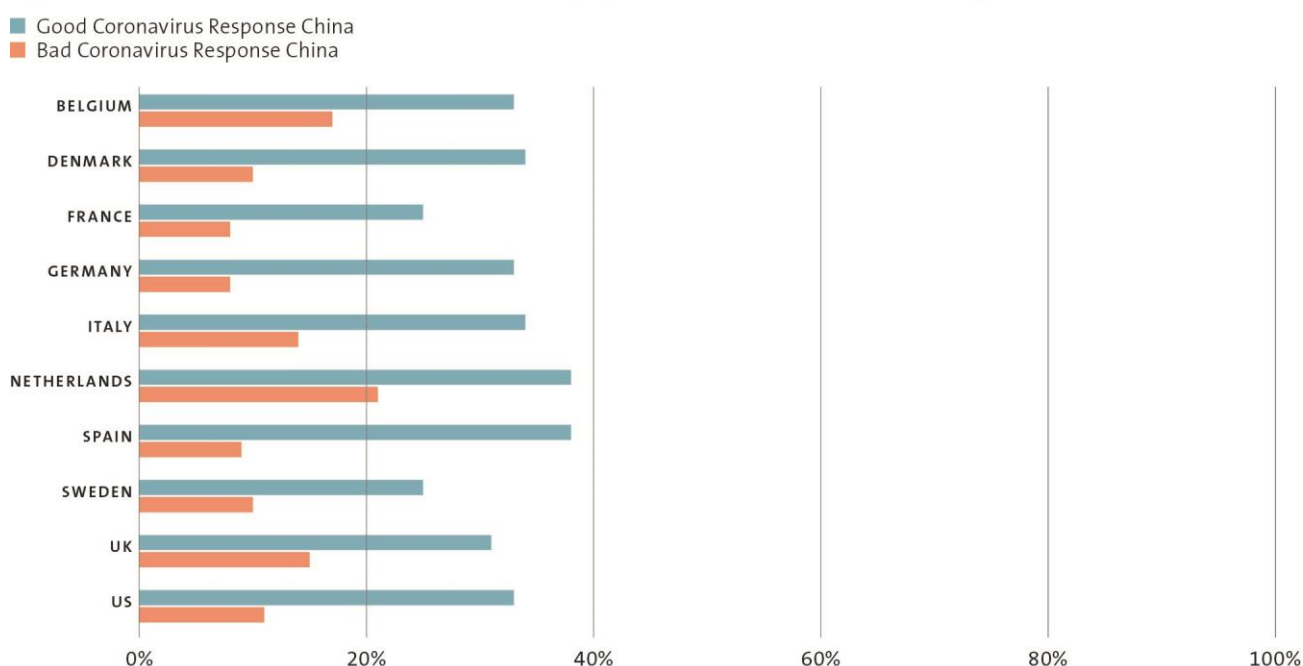
5.2 No Consistent Attempts at Fomenting Divisions

No concerted ambitions have been observed for China to sow discord within countries through its narrative control efforts. Opportunistic attempts have been undertaken to take advantage of differences between the US and European countries at the senior-most level during the Trump administration about how to engage with China during the pandemic.

An assessment of the implications of China's influence attempts depends on an understanding that the intended target of strategic effects may not necessarily be the country that is the direct subject of China's influence efforts. This consideration applies to occasional, albeit inconsistent attempts to peel allies away from the US or to weaken EU unity. The US alliance system is a strength that China has been both reluctant and struggling to replicate. Reluctant because of concerns about constraining its own strategic independence and struggling because of behavior that regularly put its own interest above all other considerations. As a secondary goal, China therefore on occasion has sought to defuse this comparative advantage by weakening the cohesion of US partnerships and EU solidarity, when opportunities

aligned with overarching narrative control priorities. These attempts at division were not linked to wider interests of building constructive relationships. Somewhat surprisingly, China has not engaged in any sustained follow-up to form stronger bilateral ties with countries targeted in these efforts of alliance weakening.

Provision of protective gear, as a sign of China's solidarity, at times appeared erratic. For example, when critical voices holding the China's delayed response responsible for the global spread of the coronavirus became louder, China endangered any good will it had developed by supplying Italy with much-needed medical equipment and instead sought to deflect responsibility. In this particular instance, Chinese media outlets made accusations that the virus actually originated from Italy by twisting the comments of Italian pharmacological scientist Giuseppe Remuzzi out of context. Stating that "the virus was circulating at least in Lombardy before we were aware of this outbreak occurring in China," Remuzzi's comments sought to address the slow information sharing of Chinese authorities in charge of warning the rest of the world about the developments

Figure 5: Confidence in Xi's International Leadership by View of China's Coronavirus Response

Source: Pew Research Center, Summer 2020 Global Attitudes Survey

afoot in China.²²⁸ Reinhard Bütikofer, chair of the European Parliament's delegation for relations with China, summarized this haphazard approach as embracing the possibility of losing Europe through "the pervasiveness of an attitude that does not purvey the will to create partnerships, but the will to tell people what to do."²²⁹

5.3 Impact of the People: Educating about Influence Efforts

In November 2018, the DoJ launched its China Initiative,²³⁰ a program designed to counter and inform about covert Chinese activities in the US, including the theft of intellectual property and technology as well as attempts to influence political leaders and the general public.

Taking stock of the initiative's achievements at the two-year mark in November 2020, US Assistant Attorney General John Demers found that the initiative has "been most successful in terms of economic

espionage, theft of intellectual property and the university side," where the department has significantly invested and was able to make progress in educating the public about potential risks.²³¹

In his assessment, Demers noted that work remains to be done with respect to the mandate on foreign influence, highlighting this as an area where the department needs "to start bringing some cases". Elaborating on these efforts, Demers, explained the possibility of bringing FARA and 951 cases against individuals in the US "who are promoting Chinese bullet points on behalf of China without saying that that's what they are doing". Acknowledging the importance of comprehensive case studies to inform the public about the nature of threats of foreign influence, Demers added that the US government has "been talking about Chinese foreign influence, but again, we lack some stories to tell on that to drive home to the public and to disrupt" these attempts.

The underlying impetus of educating the wider public stands to benefit other countries as well. Following any examples the US might raise in this context and investigating which cases could be used for

²²⁸ Didi Tang, "Beijing twisted my words on coronavirus's Italian origin, says scientist Giuseppe Remuzzi," *The Times*, 26.03.2020. <https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/beijing-twisted-my-words-on-coronaviruss-italian-origin-says-scientist-giuseppe-remuzzi-6twwhkrvn>

²²⁹ Alan Crawford / Peter Martin, "China's coronavirus Diplomacy has Finally Pushed Europe Too Far," *Bloomberg*, 22.04.2020. <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2020-04-21/china-s-coronavirus-diplomacy-has-finally-pushed-europe-too-far>

²³⁰ US Department of Justice, Remarks by Attorney General Jeff Sessions Announcing the New Initiative to Combat Chinese Economic

Espionage, Washington, DC, 1 November 2018.

<https://www.justice.gov/opa/speech/attorney-general-jeff-sessions-announces-new-initiative-combat-chinese-economic-espionage>

²³¹ Bethany Allen-Ebrahimian, "Top DOJ official John Demers on the agency's China Initiative," *Axios*, 19.01.2021.

<https://www.axios.com/justice-department-china-initiative-john-demers-6e592304-983d-4131-9fbc-4046028db217.html>; For background information on the China Initiative see: US Department of Justice, "The China Initiative: Year-in-Review (2019-20)," 16.11.2020. <https://www.justice.gov/opa/pr/china-initiative-year-review-2019-20>

illustrative purposes could prove useful for Switzerland and others interested in raising awareness at home.

To date, however, very few countermeasures have been state-led. According to the global database of counter-influence operations, established by the Partnership for Countering Influence Operations (PCIO), a comparatively small share of five per cent of the 460 initiatives in the database are orchestrated by government.²³² These figures stand in contrast to the dominant strand of recommendations in policy papers on the subject, reviewed by the PCIO, that emphasize government leadership as instrumental for combating malign influence efforts.²³³

Entries in the PCIO database demonstrate the limitations of current responses, with the overwhelming majority providing fact-checking and support for investigative journalism (38 per cent) and fundamental academic research (38 per cent).²³⁴ A small fraction of initiatives has sought to advance the understanding of specific influence operations with the promise to show opportunities for disruption (6 per cent). Clearly showing that there is room for significant growth, a still smaller set of initiatives has focused on actual countermeasures (3 per cent). Notably, an assertive in-kind response has been largely anathema to democratic nations.²³⁵

5.4 Impact by the People: Limitations and Counterproductive Effects

From an impact perspective, a serious limitation of China's influence operations has been self-imposed. Distinctively framed around the views of the CCP and the Chinese state, messaging related to the coronavirus pandemic has received narrow genuine uptake. Considering the focus on promoting China's emergency assistance and denigrating the efforts of other governments, clear differences in interest have constrained opportunistic amplification by political figures outside of China – a crucial source of outside support that in the past has benefited influence campaigns that have pandered to opposition groups. China has been less actively engaged in such efforts to

exploit existing divisions, which might explain why less of their activity has caught on. Exceptions to this are the use of repurposed third-party conspiracy material, which overt elements have used in support of China, seeking to take advantage of preconceptions favorable to China's narratives.

From a defense perspective, China's prioritization of positive messaging and categorical, and consequently less credible, criticism are good news. But these aspects also mean there is escalation potential that China might seek to leverage if it feels pressured. Especially if political tensions rise or in isolated issue areas where China perceives it has less to lose from a more assertive stance, Beijing might turn towards exploiting domestic divisions in an attempt to appeal to polarized foreign audiences.

To put engagement metrics in context, for local language content, a sample analysis for the period between 18 May and 5 June conducted by the Computational Propaganda Project at the University of Oxford shows that China's state reporting in French and German trail far behind Russia's in terms of engagement on Facebook and Twitter overall and median engagement per shared article.²³⁶ These findings are even more striking considering that the tracked Chinese outlets, China Radio International (CRI) and CGTN, have significantly larger followings on social media platforms than Russia's RT and Sputnik.

Yet, engagement statistics on social media tell a limited story about impact. It is worth recalling that one of the most referenced Facebook ads placed by Russia's Internet Research Agency (IRA) ahead of the 2016 US elections was one of the weakest-performing in terms of views and clicks it generated on the platform. The ad featured a meme of Jesus arm-wrestling Satan, with the devil declaring in the caption: "If I win Clinton wins!". The sponsored post invited users to like the ad to "help Jesus win" in his match – and beat Clinton. Following the release of IRA Facebook ads by the Democratic minority of the House Intelligence Committee in November 2017, the ad received high-profile coverage by news outlets in the US and globally, including a front-page article in *The New York Times* published the day after.²³⁷ A turn of

²³² Victoria Smith, "Mapping Worldwide Initiatives to Counter Influence Operations," *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, 14.12.2020. <https://carnegieendowment.org/2020/12/14/mapping-worldwide-initiatives-to-counter-influence-operations-pub-83435>

²³³ Kamya Yadav, "Countering Influence Operations: A Review of Policy Proposals Since 2016," *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, 30.11.2020. <https://carnegieendowment.org/2020/11/30/countering-influence-operations-review-of-policy-proposals-since-2016-pub-83333>

²³⁴ Smith, "Mapping Worldwide Initiatives to Counter Influence Operations." Coding of initiatives can include more than one focus area.

²³⁵ Stefan Soesanto, "The Dr. House Approach to Information Warfare," *Cyber Defense Review* 6:1 (2021), 119.

https://cyberdefensereview.army.mil/Portals/6/Documents/2021_winter_cdr/CDR_Winter_2021.pdf

²³⁶ Katarina Rebello et al., "Covid-19 News and Information from State-Backed Outlets Targeting French, German and Spanish-Speaking Social Media Users," *Computational Propaganda Project*, University of Oxford, 29.06.2020, 3. <https://comprop.oii.ox.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/sites/93/2020/06/Covid-19-Misinfo-Targeting-French-German-and-Spanish-Social-Media-Users-Final.pdf>

²³⁷ Cecilia Kang / Nicholas Fandos / Mike Isaac, Russia-Financed Ad Linked Clinton and Satan, *New York Times*, 01.11.2017. <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/11/01/us/politics/facebook-google-twitter-russian-interference-hearings.html>

events that disinformation researcher Thomas Rid has described as a “spectacular disinformation success story”.²³⁸

China's approach, which draws on diplomats and state-run media that through their official character receive more attention in Western press, to a much lesser degree relies on such external attention boosts to have their messages picked up in mainstream reporting for Western audiences.

The open state direction of China's influence attempts can make their targets prone to perceptions that these efforts, because they are visible, are largely ineffective and therefore irrelevant. Such perspectives might also prompt the view that countering this activity is less important since genuine user engagement is low anyway. This, however, overlooks the serious possibility that the intended objective is precisely to channel countries into inaction. As Nathan Ruser underscores, “[t]he linchpin of Beijing's disinformation strategy was a campaign of ‘implausible deniability’”,²³⁹ where the perceived cost of challenging China exceeds presumptions of impact. The nature of these influence efforts may endeavor to shape presumptions of impact or outright manipulate IO targets into banking on a lack of impact to justify not confronting China.

In this context, it is worth noting that, within China, voices have counseled to keep a low confrontational profile and warned about the consequences of pursuing even a positive image campaign from a position of assertiveness. Retired diplomats and researchers at state-linked Chinese think tanks have submitted warning reports over concerns that the aggressive approach might spur anti-China sentiment. Reuters cited one of the authors of these reports warning that, “young diplomats are taking control of strategy and want it to be more pugnacious to win domestic public opinion”.²⁴⁰ Shi YinHong, a professor for international relations at Renmin University and a longstanding adviser to China's State Council, noted that the aim of China's influence efforts “is to promote the Chinese political system as superior, and to project the image of China as a world leader in combating a global health

crisis”.²⁴¹ Shi expressed concern that these efforts are undertaken “too hastily, too soon and too loudly in tone,” creating “a huge gap between what is intended and what is achieved”. Zhu Feng, dean of international relations at Nanjing University worried that Chinese diplomats' open display of fighting spirit directly contributed to tensions in the relationship with the US.²⁴² In unusual outspokenness, both called upon China to adjust its foreign policy to stabilize the situation.

Notably, further deterioration of bilateral relations with China might remove some of the caveats advanced by domestic critics of combative diplomacy that caution restraint on influence efforts and more assertive mentality.

5.5 Switzerland: Challenges for Monitoring Implications

In its National Cyber Threat Assessment 2020, the Canadian Centre for Cyber Security found that “[c]rucially, Canada's media ecosystems are closely intertwined with those of the United States and other allies, which means that when their populations are targeted, Canadians become exposed to online influence as a type of collateral damage.”²⁴³

Through its linguistic communities, Switzerland shares similar strong linkages with the media environments of its neighboring countries. Foreign TV channels, for instance, hold a continuously dominating market share for all three major linguistic regions, making up 60 per cent in the German-speaking and 71 per cent in the French-speaking and Italian-speaking parts of Switzerland.²⁴⁴ Taking the large market share of foreign media in Switzerland as a baseline, a sizable portion of the Swiss population is likely to be exposed to narratives that take hold in foreign media. For social media platforms and online information more broadly, this institutional distinction between national and foreign media organizations is likely to play a minor role with language accessibility taking on greater importance. The share of the population reading news online has been continuously increasing to 73 per cent in 2020.²⁴⁵ In this context, language bridges into foreign

²³⁸ Rid, “Active Measures,” 408.

²³⁹ Michael Shoebridge / Lisa Sharland, “After Covid-19: Australia, the region and multilateralism (Volume 2),” *Australian Strategic Policy Institute*, September 2020. <https://www.aspi.org.au/report/after-covid-19-australia-region-and-multilateralism-volume-2>

²⁴⁰ Keith Zhai / Yew Lun Tian, “In China, a young diplomat rises as aggressive foreign policy takes root,” *Reuters*, 31.03.2020. <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-china-diplomacy-insight/in-china-a-young-diplomat-rises-as-aggressive-foreign-policy-takes-root-idUSKBN2110F8>

²⁴¹ Catherine Wong, “Too soon, too loud: Chinese foreign policy advisers tell ‘Wolf Warrior’ diplomats to tone it down,” *South China Morning Post*, 14.05.2020.

<https://www.scmp.com/news/china/diplomacy/article/3084274/too-soon-too-loud-chinese-foreign-policy-advisers-tell-wolf-warrior>

²⁴² *Ibid.*

²⁴³ Canadian Centre for Cyber Security, National Cyber Threat Assessment 2020, November 2020, 18. <https://cyber.gc.ca/sites/default/files/publications/ncta-2020-e-web.pdf>

²⁴⁴ Federal Statistical Office of Switzerland, “Fernsehen: Die wichtigsten Sender in der Schweiz,” 10.07.2020. <https://www.bfs.admin.ch/bfs/de/home/statistiken/kataloge-datenbanken/tabellen.assetdetail.13347069.html>

²⁴⁵ Federal Statistical Office of Switzerland, “Kultur, Medien und Informationsgesellschaft: Panorama,” 23.07.2020.

media environments present a greater opening for spillovers of influence attempts originally directed at another country. This might be worrisome in particular given how much attention Italy has received during the pandemic in China's messaging campaign.

Such cross-border language connections become particularly powerful on social media, which especially for younger generations, is the gateway for accessing news content. The Reuters Institute, in a survey of digital news consumption and consumer attitudes across 40 markets including Switzerland, assessed that 26 per cent of readers accessed news through social media. This share increases to 38 per cent for those 23 years old and younger.²⁴⁶ These media consumption habits contrast with widespread concern that misleading information was primarily driven through social media (40 per cent) and only to a lesser degree proliferated through dedicated news sites or custom news apps (20 per cent).²⁴⁷

6 The Subtle Art of Impact: Do Influence Operations Matter If No One Believes Their Narratives?

Aside from inherent difficulties with measuring the direct effect of influence operations on perceptions and their ability to shape narratives, adequately assessing their impact and gauging adversary investment in the underlying capabilities requires a broader understanding of their strategic value. Fundamental to this assessment is the recognition that possible effects flow not only from the original influence operation itself but also arise from how it is received, and potentially amplified, by unwitting domestic enablers. Most critically, reporting on influence attempts without manipulative intent and qualifications as to their actual effect may contribute to disinformation in itself. Rid boiled down this tenet to the mnemonic formula "disinformation about disinformation is disinformation".²⁴⁸ The publicly conflicting characterizations of the EEAS response to requests by Chinese officials drop the EU's StratCom reporting on

China's manipulation attempts serve as a noteworthy example of how domestic actors may affect the credibility of reporting on foreign influence campaigns and inadvertently abet their efforts.

6.1 A History of Boiling Retardation

To guard against self-deception that prematurely equates an observed lack of impact with the actual absence of impact, one consideration is essential: How likely is it that any impact is immediate and apparent? A historical review of past campaigns counsels to expect some time lag in observable effects.

There are fundamental differences that distinguish the premise of Cold War programs to support a free press in authoritarian settings from disinformation and narrative manipulation that media organizations under the control of authoritarian states may seek to advance. Yet it is worth recalling the shared difficulties that both face in assessing whether the strategy of transforming the reporting landscape and the public's engagement with the media is actually working. Asked about the effectiveness of Cold War funding of local-language independent media in the Eastern Bloc, former US Ambassador Daniel Fried, who in the 1980s served in the US diplomatic missions in the Soviet Union and Yugoslavia as well as in the Office of Soviet Affairs at the State Department, noted: "As an old bureaucrat I'm aware that there's a mismatch between the budget process with the need to show metrics and to justify your program and the reality that programs like this don't bring results in equal increments. For years and years, we thought we were achieving nothing and all of a sudden we looked like geniuses. Well, which was it? The fact is, in reality sometimes you don't get measurable metrics of success until they all come at once. And so you've got to be comfortable with what you're doing."²⁴⁹

Conclusion along similar lines about the effectiveness and desirability of these support activities appear to have informed the EU's decision to reinforce its assistance to free media. The Action Plan for Democracy adopted by the EU in December 2020 renewed the bloc's commitment to foster pluralism of independent media and to support the safety of journalists outside of the EU.²⁵⁰

<https://www.bfs.admin.ch/bfs/de/home/statistiken/kultur-medien-informationsgesellschaft-sport.assetdetail.13695317.html>

²⁴⁶ Newman et al., "Reuters Institute Digital News Report 2020," 24.

²⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 20.

²⁴⁸ Thomas Rid (@RidT), "Thomas Rid @RidT Disinformation about disinformation is disinformation," twitter.com, 10.07.2019. <https://twitter.com/ridt/status/1148982107642978305>

²⁴⁹ Quinta Jurecic / Alina Polyakova / Daniel Fried, "How democracies can go on offense against disinformation," *Brookings*, podcast, 4

December 2020. <https://www.brookings.edu/techstream/podcast-how-democracies-can-go-on-offense-against-disinformation/>

²⁵⁰ European Commission, "On the European Democracy Action Plan," *Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions COM(2020)/790 final*, 03.12.2020. <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=COM%3A2020%3A790%3AFIN&qid=1607079662423>

For similar reasons, any current lack of evidence of impact with respect to China's influence efforts needs to be evaluated against the potential that forces are in motion to produce delayed effects.

To counter these possible long-term effects, Ambassador Fried remarks indicate the importance of finding the neuralgic points to change how comfortable China is with its current approach. The potential for slow-burning, cumulative effects may be offset by increasing the cost for assertiveness even while the full extent of its impact remains unclear. At the same time, any efforts in this direction need to acknowledge as their upper boundary that China will not be comfortable with admitting to any failing by the central leadership of the CCP if they are to avoid further escalation.

6.2 Agents of Climate Change

Chinese efforts at influencing perceptions of other countries have so far less focused on exacerbating fundamental division and creating deep-seated discord. Darren Linvill and Patrick Warren, who are researching state-sponsored disinformation at the Clemson University Media Forensics Hub, observe that alternative narratives nonetheless pose a "serious danger here. Progress and compromise within democracies are made more difficult, if not impossible, without shared facts. Information operations, even when curtailed, may cause people to question those facts and doubt their perceived reality, and foreign actors know this."²⁵¹

Propaganda can complicate the continuous effort to maintain a common basis of facts at the level of national societies. Circumstances conducive to subverting this common basis are particularly acute in the context of the coronavirus pandemic. The complex information environment of a novel viral disease, combined with lingering uncertainty about the circumstances of its outbreak, evolving official health advice that is continuously catching up with emerging scientific findings, and serious concern for the individual wellbeing have led to a deluge of information that leaves individuals overwhelmed and vulnerable to manipulation. These conditions were recognized by the

WHO as drivers of an 'infodemic' in a joint statement issued together with several other UN organizations.²⁵²

While the direct impact on perceptions remains hard to assess or outright questionable, through their persistence, Chinese state-driven narratives have become a part of the public discourse. Without careful contextualization, even reporting that is set on debunking flawed narratives may cede agenda-setting power to China and further spur endeavors to define the framing of China's activities in public discussions overseas.

The incoming NSA Cybersecurity Director and former White House cybersecurity coordinator Robert Joyce has likened the digital threats posed by China to the effects of climate change, describing them as "long, slow, pervasive".²⁵³ Following an in-depth study of Russian influence operations against the US, Estonia, Georgia, Poland, Ukraine, Czech Republic, Nina Jankowicz, who is researching disinformation at the Wilson Center, underscored a related effect. "These initiatives produce mixed results, but one constant emerges: the Kremlin's success in injecting pernicious, false, or manipulated information into the public discourse is of secondary importance to the mood and political culture of the countries themselves"²⁵⁴

The comparison to climate change offers the additional instructive reminder, as Laura Rosenberger and Lindsay Gorman have put so well, that, in evaluating impact, "a narrow focus on discrete, tactical operations misses the point."²⁵⁵ Much as climate change poses more complicated challenges than global warming, the effects of influence operations are not one-directional or straightforwardly classified. Literally and metaphorically, the temperature is not only heating up but radical developments within this climate are becoming more unpredictable and extreme events more frequent and pervasive as a result. This change in dynamics is imperative to prepare for as Europe is embarking on a more principled approach in its engagement with China.

In this vein, it is worth recalling that influence operations may also become consequential through the response they elicit. China's aggressive diplomatic posturing on occasion has triggered push-backs that have risked self-inflicting reputational damage and credibility losses. Tit-

²⁵¹ Darren Linvill / Patrick Warren, "Foreign Influence Operations Don't Need to Succeed to be Effective," *Lawfare*, 23.10.2020. <https://www.lawfareblog.com/foreign-influence-operations-dont-need-succeed-be-effective>

²⁵² Joint statement by WHO, UN, UNICEF, UNDP, UNESCO, UNAIDS, ITU, UN Global Pulse, and IFRC, *Managing the COVID-19 infodemic: Promoting healthy behaviours and mitigating the harm from misinformation and disinformation*, 23.09.2020. <https://www.who.int/news/item/23-09-2020-managing-the-covid-19-infodemic-promoting-healthy-behaviours-and-mitigating-the-harm-from-misinformation-and-disinformation>

²⁵³ Bastien Inzaurrealde, "The Cybersecurity 202: U.S. officials: It's China hacking that keeps us up at night," *Washington Post*,

06.03.2019.

<https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/powerpost/paloma/the-cybersecurity-202/2019/03/06/the-cybersecurity-202-u-s-officials-it-s-china-hacking-that-keeps-us-up-at-night/5c7ec07f1b326b2d177d5fd3/>

²⁵⁴ Joshua Yaffa, "Is Russian Meddling as Dangerous as We Think?," *New Yorker*, 07.09.2020.

<https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2020/09/14/is-russian-meddling-as-dangerous-as-we-think>

²⁵⁵ Laura Rosenberger / Lindsay Gorman, "Foreign Interference is a Strategy, Not a Tactic," *Lawfare*, 26.10.2020. <https://www.lawfareblog.com/foreign-interference-strategy-not-tactic>

for-tat engagements tend to be more damaging for officials in democratic systems as they are held accountable by their domestic audience, who is demanding a faithfulness to facts. In remarks during an interview with ABC in May 2020, former US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo claimed to have been presented with “a significant amount of evidence that [the coronavirus] came from that laboratory in Wuhan,” referring to the Wuhan Institute of Virology.²⁵⁶ At one point during the interview, Pompeo asserted that, “the best experts so far seem to think it was manmade”. Pompeo changed his stance when confronted with public conclusions by the US Intelligence Community that aligned with the “wide scientific consensus that the COVID-19 virus was not manmade or genetically modified”.²⁵⁷ This incident shows the risks entailed in attempts to outmatch foreign influence narratives to overcompensate and discredit the messenger.

6.3 Edge of Tomorrow: Metrics for Future Capability Development

Presumptions of low impact on the part of the targets of influence operations can be of strategic advantage to adversaries that seek to test and further develop capabilities. Low-impact operations may also prove useful from the standpoint of establishing precedents that may become more difficult to challenge later in light of more serious concerns.

Certain aspects of influence operations are likely intended to produce meta-level output for an overlooked audience: decision-makers at home. Some of the more easily detectable influence operations still generate performance indicators for superiors and funding authorities and need to be assessed against the consideration that the metrics of today facilitate the capabilities of tomorrow. Through this lens, takedowns of social media accounts that serve as amplification network, even as they result in the immediate loss of proliferation infrastructure, may be taken as demonstration that an operation hit a nerve in mission reports filed in the bid to secure additional funding. Such metric-driven influence operations still matter, even if of questionable short-term effect, because they can

ensure funding continuity in support of capability buildup.

Chinese officials have prominently addressed deficits in international discourse power and capabilities to shape narratives abroad. As one of the reasons for falling short of wielding international influence Hua in her article for *The Study Times* in July 2019 identified the “insufficiently developed systems and mechanisms” (《体制机制不够完善》) necessary to “occupy the commanding heights of truth and righteousness” (《占据真理和正义的制高点》).²⁵⁸ Hua at the time linked this push to win over the international community’s understanding to equal efforts at developing trust and argued that both needed to be pursued “through sincere and open communication” (《通过真诚开放的沟通》). Hua qualified this outreach by making it subject to the Maoist slogan “to seek truth from facts” (《实事求是》), a maxim that has been closely intertwined with politically motivated revisions of China’s history and calls for strict adherence to the party.²⁵⁹ In Maoist tradition, “to seek truth from facts” has been interpreted as a call to “integrate theory with practice”,²⁶⁰ where “practice was the “sole criterion of truth”” and “practice boiled down to achieving anticipated results”²⁶¹.

This link to “seeking truth from facts” throws the strategic importance ascribed to developing the capabilities to control narratives overseas into stark relief. Deng Xiaoping, the architect of China’s economic opening and China’s *de facto* leader when broader engagement with the West resumed in the late 1970s, highlighted that the CCP “achieved all the victories in [its] revolution by following this principle”.²⁶²

Capacity building also featured as a core theme in an article from the Party Literature Research Center of the CCP’s Central Committee, published in the *People’s Daily* on 4 January 2021. The article reiterated “fundamental guidelines for the party’s propaganda and thought work in the new era” that Xi Jinping had expounded in his November 2020 book “On the Party’s Propaganda and Thought Work” (《论党的宣传思想工作》). Section four of the article on “improving the national cultural soft power and Chinese cultural influence, tell the Chinese story well, and spread the Chinese voice well” outlines the need to “promote international communication capacity building and strive to improve

²⁵⁶ Mike Pompeo, interview with Martha Raddatz on “This Week”, ABC News, 5 March 2020. <https://abcnews.go.com/ThisWeek/video/secretary-state-mike-pompeo-70478299>

²⁵⁷ Office of the Director of National Intelligence, “Intelligence Community Statement on Origins of COVID-19,” 30.04.2020. <https://www.dni.gov/index.php/newsroom/press-releases/item/2112-intelligence-community-statement-on-origins-of-covid-19>

²⁵⁸ Hua Chunying, «占据道义制高点·提升国际话语权».

²⁵⁹ Sebra Yen / Rachael Burton, “Seek Truth from Facts: The Chinese Communist Party’s War on History,” *Project 2049 Institute*,

07.11.2016. <https://project2049.net/2016/11/07/seek-truth-from-facts-the-chinese-communist-partys-war-on-history/>

²⁶⁰ Deng Xiaoping, “Emancipate the Mind, Seek Truth from Facts and Unite as One in Looking to the Future,” Speech at the Central Working Conference for the Third Plenary Session of the Eleventh Central Committee of the Chinese Communist Party, Beijing, 13 December 1978. <http://en.people.cn/dengxp/vol2/text/b1260.html>

²⁶¹ Michael Sullivan, “C.C.P. Ideology since the Third Plenum,” in B. Brugger (ed.), *Chinese Marxism in Flux 1978-84* (Sydney: Croom Helm Ltd., 1985), 77.

²⁶² Deng, “Emancipate the Mind”.

international discourse". The passage is worth quoting in full: "International discourse is an important part of national cultural soft power. General Secretary Xi Jinping pointed out that being backward means being beaten, being poor means being hungry, and losing one's voice means being scolded. For a long time, our Party has been leading the people to solve the three major problems of "being beaten", "being hungry" and "being scolded". After several generations of unremitting struggle, the first two problems have basically been solved, but the problem of "being scolded" has not yet been fundamentally solved. The fight for international discourse is a major issue that we must resolve. General Secretary Xi Jinping pointed out that it is necessary to strengthen the construction of a foreign discourse system, to show Chinese ideas more clearly, and to put forward Chinese ideas more loudly. Efforts should be undertaken to build a new world-class mainstream media with strong leadership, communication power and influence, to form an international discourse power that is commensurate with China's comprehensive national power, to better introduce the new era China to the world, and to better present the real China in its entirety and all its dimensions."²⁶³

These capability priorities track with shortcomings noted in reviews of China's messaging campaigns. Chinese influence efforts over the course of the pandemic have generated an immense research interest and tremendous body of public analysis²⁶⁴ dissecting observed tradecraft. This analytic attention has resulted in a trove of after action reports that identify operational weaknesses. Jessica Brandt and Bret Schafer, for instance, perceptively note that of the 566 accounts that had been suspended by Twitter in the second and third quarter of 2020 and had previously been retweeted by Chinese diplomats, nine were among the top 100 of accounts most frequently retweeted by these Chinese officials.²⁶⁵ By contrast, no similar correlations between suspended accounts and retweets have been ascertained for Russian diplomats over the same period – a distinction that may both speak to a

greater degree of subtlety on the part of Russia's amplification efforts and the greater importance China assigns to integrated messaging.

6.4 Edge of the Precipice: Signaling Effects and Escalation Potential

As with studying any other form of communication, the medium is part of the message.²⁶⁶ Perhaps counterintuitively for messaging campaigns that put the focus on the narrative, the mechanisms of its dissemination assume a critical signaling function. In the context of China's influence operations, these mechanisms matter because the same proliferation machinery of state media, diplomats, and botnets could be deployed to run a variety of different messages. That the messages spun by this network during the first year of the coronavirus crisis were unlikely to reach a wider foreign audience – at least not without further mediation by mainstream media – is not a foregone conclusion. In fact, provocative but inconsequential messages make for a better signaling case, as they generate attention just as they contain the risk of an escalatory response and demonstrate the effort at developing an integrated messaging capability alongside commitment to refining it further. From the perspective of signaling, the underlying message then is the understanding that components of this capability could be used to promote outright harmful material, possibly as part of a hack-and-leak operation, if China felt pressure to escalate.

Any upgrade to hack-and-leak operations would undoubtedly increase the escalation potential. The signaling involved in the development and testing of messaging capabilities that could be deployed to exploit the leak of any illicitly obtained politically damaging material already seeks to achieve concessions in the public response to China at lower cost. Communications of a willingness on China's part to use this ability to circulate more hostile or divisive content if relations

²⁶³ Original Chinese text of the quoted passage: 《四、提高国家文化软实力和中华文化影响力·讲好中国故事、传播好中国声音:推进国际传播能力建设,努力提高国际话语权。国际话语权是国家文化软实力的重要组成部分。习近平总书记指出,落后就要挨打,贫穷就要挨饿,失语就要挨骂。长期以来,我们党带领人民就是要不断解决“挨打”、“挨饿”、“挨骂”这三大问题。经过几代人不懈奋斗,前两个问题基本得到解决,但“挨骂”问题还没有得到根本解决。争取国际话语权是我们必须解决好的一个重大问题。习近平总书记指出,要加强对对外话语体系建设,更加鲜明地展现中国思想,更加响亮地提出中国主张。努力打造具有强大引领力、传播力、影响力的国际一流新型主流媒体,形成同我国综合国力相适应的国际话语权,更好向世界介绍新时代的中国,更好展现真实、立体、全面的中国。》Party Literature Research Center of the CCP's Central Committee, «新时代党的宣传思想工作的根本遵循», *People's Daily*, 04.01.2021. <http://politics.people.com.cn/n1/2021/0104/c1001-31987394.html>

²⁶⁴ Journal publications that mention China in the context of influence operations alone climbed by 118 per cent in 2020. This estimate is based on the author's queries of academic databases combining "China" with key search terms linked to influence operations research as identified by the Partnership for Countering Influence Operations, namely "disinformation", "influence operation", "misinformation", and "information operation". Adding the keyword "propaganda" to search requests returned a notably lower increase in the number of publications for 2020 (31 per cent), reflecting the historically wide and positive use of the term by Chinese authorities. These figures do not account for the body of think tank reporting that tends to be strongly responsive to current political developments.

²⁶⁵ Jessica Brandt / Bret Schafer, "How China's 'wolf warrior' diplomats use and abuse Twitter," *Brookings*, 28.10.2020. <https://www.brookings.edu/techstream/how-chinas-wolf-warrior-diplomats-use-and-abuse-twitter/>

²⁶⁶ Marshall McLuhan, *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man*, (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1964).

deteriorate could, however, also be designed to manage a further buildup of tension. Consider for a moment what it would mean for the reach and effectiveness of China's messaging if the same mechanics were deployed not to extol ideological positions of the CCP but to amplify authentic compromising material; if the anodyne propaganda and aggressive yet baseless allegations of material shortcomings were swapped out for damaging authentic documentation obtained illicitly from confidential sources.

Considerations of such a scenario of future escalation raise questions about the net effects of China's influence efforts during the pandemic on escalation dynamics to date. Exacerbated tensions in China's relations with the US and large parts of Europe indicate that, at least on the official level, the initial volley of assertive messaging backfired on China. Any possible attempts at signaling that the machinery developed for its distribution could be used for material that could prove more damaging have done little to mitigate this blowback. The Chinese leadership might not have been fully intentional or aware about the cost it has incurred in this process – or originally conceived of it as a signaling campaign. In light of significant sunk cost in terms of reputational damage, however, China may be more inclined going forward to reverse this trend and to use tested messaging capabilities in ways that now prove more destructive to adversaries in case of further deteriorations in diplomatic relations, to recuperate from this painful gambit by reinforcing the signaling component.

6.5 All Eyes on the Edge: Risks of Strategic Distraction

Through the raucous approach of its overt messaging campaign, China has absorbed overseas media attention that, amid pressing coronavirus pandemic coverage, has tied up resources for following and reporting on China's wider activities. In addition to the strategic considerations related to achieving persistence explored above, the noisy nature of China's official narrative overture – even where it failed to exert meaningful influence over perceptions – has sought to actualize its potential by distracting from and reducing coverage of unquestionably impactful steps China has taken within

its vicinity. In this vein, Chinese tactics have attempted to leverage reporting priorities in their favor, speculating that influence attempts directed at foreign audiences would be deemed as of greater concern by media organizations in targeted countries – even as their exact impact remains under discussion and deserves careful analysis.

In parallel to these narrative campaigns, China has moved to create facts in a real and much more tangible sense.

Notably, China has moved to roll back the administrative principle of “one country, two systems” that had governed relations between Hong Kong and the Mainland with the central enactment of the Hong Kong National Security Law in June 2020. Throughout the pandemic, China has repeatedly sought to advance the diplomatic isolation of Taiwan, denying its approval for Taiwan's participation in the World Health Assembly (WHA).²⁶⁷ Among other high-level developments, a number of investigative reports have explored the extent of forced labor transfers involving ethnic minorities in Xinjiang and the benefit of international companies.²⁶⁸

6.6 Falling off the Edge: Unintended Influence

The prioritization China assigned to information control in the early days of the outbreak and the perceived imperative to establish impressions of strong national leadership hampered information flows that at the time had no comprehensive sources outside of China. The true impact of this delayed and incomplete situational awareness on the preparedness of the wider world and the prospect of a decelerated spread is difficult, if not impossible, to assess. Australia has vociferously called for a robust investigation into the circumstances surrounding the emergence of the coronavirus and an independent evaluation of early crisis responses. To this end, Australia's Prime Minister Scott Morrison urged for reforms that would allow the WHO or another international body to recruit investigators with strong mandates similar to those of “weapons inspectors”.²⁶⁹ Together with the European Union and its member states, Australia advanced a WHA resolution to launch an independent probe.²⁷⁰ China eventually co-

²⁶⁷ Simon Bradley, “Covid-19 to dominate ‘unprecedented’ virtual World Health Assembly,” *SwissInfo*, 18.05.2020. https://www.swissinfo.ch/eng/-/wha73_covid-19-to-dominate--unprecedented--virtual-world-health-assembly/45763494

²⁶⁸ Adrian Zenz, *Coercive Labor and Forced Displacement in Xinjiang's Cross-Regional Labor Transfers: A Process-Oriented Evaluation*, Jamestown Foundation, March 2021, <https://jamestown.org/product/coercive-labor-and-forced-displacement-in-xinjiangs-cross-regional-labor-transfer-program/>; Vicky Xiuzhong Xu et al., “Uyghurs for sale: ‘Re-education’, forced

labour and surveillance beyond Xinjiang,” *Australian Strategic Policy Institute*, March 2020 <https://www.aspi.org.au/report/uyghurs-sale>.

²⁶⁹ Kirsty Needham, “Australia to pursue coronavirus investigation at World Health Assembly,” *Reuters*, 23.04.2020. <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-health-coronavirus-australia-china-idUSKCN2251G7>

²⁷⁰ Kirsty Needham, “Australia welcomes growing support for COVID-19 inquiry at WHO meeting,” *Reuters*, 18.05.2020. <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-health-coronavirus-who-australia-idUSKBN22U00P>

sponsored the resolution prior to its adoption,²⁷¹ although state media was quick to style the independent panel established under the resolution as falling short off the impartial inquiry Australia had lobbied for.²⁷²

Following their summit in Cornwall in June 2021, the G7 leaders in their communiqué jointly called for a “timely, transparent, expert-led, and science-based WHO-convened Phase 2 COVID-19 Origins study”, specifically including China.²⁷³ The EU and US repeated this position almost verbatim just two days later after their bilateral summit but went beyond the G7 communiqué in emphasizing the need for such an investigation to be “free from interference”.²⁷⁴ Speaking to Reuters off the record, one EU official, however, clarified that the EU was “not going to launch [its] own probe,” noting that the EU did not have an anti-China position.²⁷⁵ Responding to these statements, the Chinese embassy in the UK viewed the calls for a renewed investigation as “a complete deviation from the spirit of science and typical political manipulation” that could only impair international cooperation and would run counter to “the shared wishes of the international community to work together against Covid-19.”²⁷⁶

While not directly intended by any efforts at information and narrative control, adverse effects on the speed of the international reaction is the one component to most likely have had effects on physical wellbeing. EU officials have also expressed explicit concern that disinformation in the coronavirus context can lead to direct bodily harm. These worries have concentrated on side effects of influence operations that may weaken communications and trust between governments and their public, with the potential to lead the population to disregard health advice as a result of deficient situational awareness. HR/VP Borrell warned in June 2020 “that disinformation can do real damage. In the case of a pandemic which affects the health of the people, it is even more dangerous.”²⁷⁷

Initial attempts at downplaying the emerging pandemic accomplished little with respect to changing international views of China’s crisis management but slowed the flow of time-sensitive information –causing delays that then US National Security Advisor Robert O’Brien deemed a critical contribution to the global outbreak. In O’Brien’s view, such hold-ups “probably cost the world community two months to respond”. Had Chinese authorities taken up the WHO and the US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention on their offers of assistance, O’Brien concluded, these steps “could have dramatically curtailed what happened in China and what’s now happening across the world”.²⁷⁸

Conclusion

Under tremendous domestic and international pressure, China’s response to the pandemic has extensively sought to shape perceptions in its favor through overt and at times aggressive messaging by its diplomats. Taking advantage of exceptions created by social media platforms to further democratic discussions, China’s state-directed messaging has been able to expand the reach of its propaganda well beyond its traditional sphere of the Chinese diaspora and Taiwan.

While at times underhanded and in its most brazen expressions not without pushback from other countries and social media platforms, Chinese influence efforts have shown persistence and won international attention – although not always in China’s benefit. This has given China considerable influence over the focus of reporting even as these measures have regularly fallen short of the ultimate ambition to control the precise angle of the coverage.

Attempts at assessing the impact of China’s influence operations need to be mindful that the more subtle implications might be more impactful and harder to detect in the short-term. The apparent endeavor to exert control over narratives represents only one of several objectives, some of which threaten to be of

²⁷¹ 73rd World Health Assembly, “COVID-19 response,” A73/CONF./1Rev.1, 18.05.2020. https://apps.who.int/gb/ebwha/pdf_files/WHA73/A73_CONF1Rev1-en.pdf

²⁷² Chen Qingqing / Liu Xin, “Australia gets ‘slap to the face’ as global community welcomes China-sponsored resolution on COVID-19,” *Global Times*, 19.05.2020. <https://www.globaltimes.cn/content/1188817.shtml>

²⁷³ G7, *Carbis Bay G7 Summit Communiqué - Our Shared Agenda for Global Action to Build Back Better*, 13.06.2021. <https://www.g7uk.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/06/Carbis-Bay-G7-Summit-Communique-PDF-430KB-25-pages-1-2.pdf>

²⁷⁴ European Council, *EU-US Summit 2021 –Statement Towards a renewed Transatlantic Partnership*, 15.06.2021. <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/media/50758/eu-us-summit-joint-statement-15-june-final-final.pdf>

²⁷⁵ Robin Emmott, “EU, U.S. to set deadlines to end tariffs, urge progress on COVID study -summit draft,” *Reuters*, 09.06.2021. <https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/eu-us-end-trade-tariffs-call-new-study-into-covid-19-origins-summit-draft-says-2021-06-09/>

²⁷⁶ Embassy of the PRC in the United Kingdom, “Embassy Spokesperson Answers Questions Regarding Contents Related to China in G7 Summit Communiqué,” 14.06.2021. <http://www.chinese-embassy.org.uk/eng/PressandMedia/Spokepersons/t1883743.htm>

²⁷⁷ Josep Borrell, Remarks at the European Parliament session on tackling COVID-19 disinformation and the impact on freedom of expression, Brussels, 18 June 2020. https://eeas.europa.eu/headquarters/headquarters-homepage/81113/covid-19-disinformation-remarks-hrvp-josep-borrell-european-parliament-session-tackling-covid_en

²⁷⁸ Dave Lawler, “Robert O’Brien: China’s coronavirus cover-up ‘cost the world’ two months,” *Axios*, 11.03.2020. <https://www.axios.com/china-coronavirus-cover-up-wuhan-robert-obrien-7febd3fb-533c-4df6-bd39-ac5c0ae1c284.html>

more important long-term consequence than the immediate effort to exert influence itself.

Impact assessments need to carefully look beyond the primary objective of narrative control. Indeed, narrative control might be the most obvious but least influential aspect. For all their openness, other strategically advantageous effects of China's influence operations might require more subtle analysis going forward.

In this respect, delays in effects, continued capability refinement, signaling intentions, dangers of distraction, and unintended consequences value particular attention. These considerations hold true irrespective of the future trajectory of China's international relations. Managing differences with China without driving up the escalation potential, however, will prove a decisive factor in containing the fallout of China's influence operations. China has undertaken a concerted endeavor to develop an integrated messaging machinery and has demonstrated its willingness to burn diplomatic capital by pushing aggressive statements even in light of uncertain gains. This sunk cost in terms of reputational damage may reduce inhibitions to deploy tested capabilities for spinning and amplifying harmful confidential material. Further signaling in this direction might find expression in politically motivated espionage in search for damaging material. The hunt for any potentially compromising communications regarding the procurement and distribution of coronavirus vaccines, in addition to their high-value holdings of intellectual property, make pharmaceutical companies engaged in this market a high-profile target. Considering these underlying tensions, it is crucial to evaluate incidents like the mass exploitation of several zero-day vulnerabilities in Microsoft's Exchange Servers in early 2021, which has targeted infectious disease researchers, together with universities, law firms, defense contractors, and policy think tanks, with these ramifications in mind.²⁷⁹ Microsoft itself has attributed this original campaign with high confidence to a previously tracked state-backed group linked to China. On July 19, The United States, in cooperation with its Five Eyes partners, also announced that it had concluded with high confidence that a Chinese state-backed actor was responsible for the compromise and initial exploitation. In an unprecedented coordinated messaging campaign, allies in Europe and Asia, joined by

the European Union and NATO as institutions, concurrently released statements calling out malicious cyber activity that originated from China.²⁸⁰

China's recourse to influence operations during the pandemic has evoked comparisons with Russia, with many commenters suggesting that China had taken a page from Russia's polarization playbook.²⁸¹ As this study finds, China's operations have focused on emphasizing China's successes and disparaging geopolitical rivals rather than seeking to directly exacerbate divisions. In this endeavor, China has sought to ground the center of gravity of its operations within the limits of platform rules and entrench a distinction between its own efforts at narrative control and a "common evil" of disinformation, for which it stresses its own victimhood. The semblance of legitimacy drawn from operating within the boundaries of platform rules might make China's playbook of wider appeal.

²⁷⁹ Microsoft, "HAFNIUM targeting Exchange Servers with 0-day exploits," 2.03.2021. <https://www.microsoft.com/security/blog/2021/03/02/hafnium-targeting-exchange-servers/>

²⁸⁰ For an overview of participating states and the nature of their public statements see Stefan Soesanto (@iiyonite), "Left side the normal version. Right side the version including simple retweets (i.e., no self-written tweet/statement). I don't think any of the remaining countries will release any supporting statements.," twitter.com, 19.07.2021. <https://twitter.com/iiyonite/status/1417218185619722240>

²⁸¹ Jessica Brandt / Torrey Taussig, "The Kremlin's disinformation playbook goes to Beijing," *Brookings*, 19.05.2020, <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/order-from-chaos/2020/05/19/the-kremlins-disinformation-playbook-goes-to-beijing/>; Edward Lucas / Jake Morris / Corina Rebegea, "Information Bedlam: Russian and Chinese Information Operations During Covid-19," *Center for European Policy Analysis*, March 2021, <https://cepa.org/information-bedlam-russian-and-chinese-information-operations-during-covid-19/>.

Abbreviations

ASD	Alliance for Securing Democracy
CAC	Cyberspace Administration of China
CCP	Chinese Communist Party
CCTV	China Central Television
CGTN	China Global Television Network Corporation
CICIR	China Institutes of Contemporary International Relations
CNNIC	China Internet Network Information Center
CRI	China Radio International
CSA	Conseil Supérieur de l'Audiovisuel
DoJ	US Department of Justice
ECFR	European Council on Foreign Relations
ECTT	European Convention on Transfrontier Television
EEAS	European External Action Service
EP	European Parliament
FARA	Foreign Agents Registration Act
HR/VP	High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy and Vice-President of the European Commission
INGE	EP Special Committee on Foreign Interference in all Democratic Processes in the European Union, including Disinformation
IO	Influence Operation
IRA	Internet Research Agency
IRGC	Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps
LSG	Leading Small Group
MSS	Ministry of State Security of the People's Republic of China
NIH	US National Institutes of Health
OEWG	Open-ended Working Group
PCIO	Partnership for Countering Influence Operations
SCML	Star China Media Limited
WHA	World Health Assembly
WHO	World Health Organization

About the Author

Jakob Bund is a Senior Researcher and the Project Lead Cyberdefense within the Risk and Resilience Team at the Center for Security Studies (CSS) at ETH Zürich. He provides advice to the Swiss Ministry of Defense to inform policy perspectives on cyber-enabled influence operations, technological dependence, and the political responses to cyber threats emanating from great power competition.



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