

# Grey Areas of Digital Transnational Repression on Western Media Platforms

Allison Koh<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Centre for International Security, Hertie School, Berlin

## SUMMARY

Repressive governments and their supporters are increasingly leveraging the affordances of Western media platforms to harass outspoken regime critics in exile and diaspora communities. The tactics used by repressive governments and their supporters comprise a broader strategy of engaging in *digital transnational repression*—the use of digital tools for implementing repressive policies with the aim of silencing or coercing the diaspora located outside of territorial borders. In recent years, notable cases include media attacks targeting individuals in the Uyghur diaspora by Chinese authorities and their supporters, pro-Kremlin smear campaigns targeting activists in the Eastern European diaspora, and the harassment of Persian journalists abroad by pro-government actors in Iran. While relevant case studies have uncovered the nature and breadth of state media attacks that transcend territorial boundaries, little is known about broader implications for transnational repression. To address this research gap, this dissertation investigates the contours of *grey propaganda*—or that which cannot be definitively attributed to repressive governments—in media attacks published on Western platforms.

Online media have transformed how repressive governments and their supporters target their own in the online opposition abroad. One of the primary affordances that online media offer are innovative opportunities for *plausible deniability* among perpetrators of state-aligned media attacks. In the offline world, violent repression is often outsourced to pro-government militias to mask state entities' involvement in events that might trigger backlash mobilization. The online world offers creative ways to emulate this dynamic. Repressive states can either delegate posting pro-regime content via bots and trolls, or post seemingly neutral content mentioning the opposition to provoke contributions from genuine regime loyalists. States and pro-regime actors can also strategically manipulate *language* in their production of targeted smear campaigns on Western media platforms. For instance, content with more vitriol may not be as prevalent among posts published in more globally accessible languages, such as English, compared to languages that are local to the country from which a targeted attack originates. Language in itself can also communicate specific signals. In the Chinese context, for example, Mandarin is the “oppressor’s language” in attacks targeting individuals from peripheral territories. Finally, the *location of a target’s host country* may factor into state strategies for harassing individuals in the diaspora. In democracies, exile and diaspora communities have more options for communicating information about repression in their home countries, while non-democracies are more inclined to cooperate with repressive countries.

Among potential targets of digital repression across platforms, not all state-aligned smear campaigns are created and distributed equitably. Gender minorities and members of marginalized groups are particularly vulnerable to state media attacks because their identities can be weaponized in a variety of ways. First, patriarchal and Western colonial norms are pervasive globally. At home and abroad, gender minorities and other marginalized identities are consequently “easier” to discredit and silence. Second, feminists and other social movements mobilizing around shared marginalized identities threaten regime legitimacy. The messaging from these movements have the capacity to resonate with up to 50% of a country’s population, which adds a layer of complexity to the “dictator’s dilemma” of balancing absolute power while collecting information on actual public support. Finally, narratives specific to marginalized identities expand an

autocrat's lexical toolbox for engaging in targeted smear campaigns. These narratives often draw from a prescribed set of "rules" that subjugate marginalized groups from active participation in society, which render active and oppositional voices from these groups easy targets for pro-regime actors.

To study some of these expectations, I am working on a case study with NYU's Center for Social Media and Politics. In this study, we focus on the gendered aspects and contours of pro-CCP attacks targeting the Uyghur diaspora on Twitter. We use information on Chinese authorities' surveillance and harassment targeting prominent Uyghur individuals abroad, a pro-CCP stance classifier, and an expanded sample of Uyghurs on Twitter to compile a corpus of tweets for testing our expectations. With these data, we analyze whether women in the Uyghur diaspora are more likely to be attacked with vitriol on pro-CCP Twitter based on toxicity scores from the Perspective API. Controlling for gender, we also empirically test whether content produced by overtly state-affiliated accounts differs from that of other pro-CCP users, and whether pro-CCP tweets in English differ from those published in Chinese. Finally, we plan to explore the topics discussed in targeted mentions of Uyghurs in the diaspora and possible differences based on the gender of targeted individuals. Our findings from this study have important implications for studying gender, state-sponsored disinformation, and digital repression originating from authoritarian contexts.

Building on this work, I plan to delve into the broader implications of state-aligned media attacks on Western platforms for transnational repression. To flesh out how digital transnational repression materializes between traditional media outlets and social media platforms, and where it fits in the Chinese repression toolkit, I plan to investigate the timing of targeted smear campaigns across platforms with a global readership. I also envision working on a comparative study that seeks to understand the relationship between what we observe on pro-regime social media and offline repression in the transnational dimension.