

# Dissertation Summary

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My dissertation, titled “Grey Areas of Digital Transnational Repression on Western Media Platforms”, leverages information from platforms with a global readership to understand the contours of *grey propaganda*—or that which cannot be definitively attributed to governments—in media attacks targeting diaspora communities from repressive contexts. The use of social media content by state-aligned entities and their supporters comprise a broader strategy of engaging in *digital transnational repression*—or the use of digital tools for implementing repressive policies with the aim of silencing or coercing the diaspora located outside of territorial borders. With an empirical focus on pro-CCP Twitter’s attacks on prominent regime critics in the Uyghur diaspora, I demonstrate the importance of understanding how digital transnational repression materializes in the public sphere.

Online media have transformed how repressive governments and their supporters target exile and diaspora critics in the online opposition abroad. To investigate how platform affordances and identities can be weaponized by state-aligned users, I am working with Professors Joshua Tucker and Jonathan Nagler at NYU’s Center for Social Media and Politics on a case study focusing on pro-CCP tweets targeting regime critics in the Uyghur diaspora. In this project, we investigate sources of variation in the *toxicity*—or the probability that a tweet will lead to a target limiting their activity on the platform<sup>1</sup>—of pro-CCP tweets in their targeted media attacks. Our primary expectation is that, among all pro-CCP tweets, posts authored by overtly state-affiliated accounts<sup>2</sup> are—on average—less likely to be toxic compared to content produced by other pro-CCP accounts without clear ties to the state. To assess possible sources of variation in toxicity due to cultural aspects, we also hypothesize that women among the diaspora regime critics are more likely to be targeted with toxic content, and that English-language tweets are less likely to be toxic compared to tweets published in Chinese. Our findings have important implications for identifying how state-aligned actors can manipulate new media to engage in transnational smear campaigns.

To further delve into the implications of pro-government social media for transnational repression, another paper in my dissertation investigates the relationship between pro-CCP tweets targeting diaspora regime critics and domestic policies that target ethnic minorities in China. I identify potential shifts in the online activity of pro-CCP tweeters after April 2017, when the Chinese government started arbitrarily detaining Uyghurs, ethnic Kazakhs, and minority Muslim groups in internment camps. I theorize that CCP-aligned actors add noise to relevant conversations involving prominent diaspora regime critics, and that this manipulation of the online environment is collaborative. In particular, I posit that the overall *volume* of relevant content increases, tweets are more *coordinated*, and that topical *focus* decreases. Using a matching design, I test my hypotheses with two datasets: (i) all tweets mentioning keywords relevant to “Xinjiang” and the Uyghur region, and (ii) a dataset of pro-CCP tweets identified by a fine-tuned BERT + Active Learning model. The findings of this study illustrate how state-aligned actors manipulate the transnational information environment around diaspora discussions of domestic Chinese repression.

Finally, to synthesize the contributions of this research, I outline a novel conceptual and empirical basis for studying digital transnational repression with social media data. The findings from research on digital transnational repression and foreign influence operations have important real-world implications, which include the development of more nuanced policy recommendations for media platforms. However,

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<sup>1</sup><https://perspectiveapi.com/>

<sup>2</sup>e.g. accounts with “China state-affiliated media” labels

most relevant academic studies focus on one of these concepts without addressing the other. In particular, we know little about (i) how foreign influence operations vary based on who the target is and (ii) the role of public-facing media attacks in regimes' strategies for transnational repression. I suggest that it is important to develop an analytically consistent understanding of digital transnational repression in the public sphere to address these shortcomings. In particular, it is crucial to identify how platforms with a global readership can be manipulated to alter the transnational information environment and weaken vocal regime critics residing abroad. Our collective understanding of "exit and voice" in the context of relevant scholarship also points to prominent figures in exile and diaspora communities as particularly vulnerable to state-aligned media attacks. Overall, this paper sheds light on how state-aligned actors can engage in targeted media attacks to curtail the transnational information environment and contributes to the systematic study of digital transnational repression.