China Information Operations Newsletter 07 October 2021

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The China Information Operations Newsletter is edited by Hannah Bailey, a researcher at the Programme on Democracy and Technology (DemTech) at Oxford University. This newsletter is **an 8 minute read**.

Who is behind China's international influence campaigns?

While military tensions have escalated between China and Taiwan in recent weeks, behind the scenes China has been waging a longer disinformation war. In our 2020 report on Industrialised Disinformation in 82 countries, we note that Taiwanese elections have been the target of Chinese state-

backed propaganda since 2014.

The World Bicycle Industry Association, a Colorado High School and a French nature society called the Association of 3 Hedgehogs and For All Moonkind are among the latest organisations to offend Beijing bureaucrats. All of these organisations failed to use China's preferred language when referring to Taiwan on their websites. China is increasingly using its seat on the on the U.N. Committee on Non-Governmental Organizations to influence how these international groups refer to Taiwan. As *The Wall Street Journal* reports, Chinese bureaucrats examine every group that applies to participate in UN functions. If websites run by these groups do not refer to "Taiwan, Province of China", Beijing bureaucrats will stall their application.

Throughout the COVID-19 pandemic, China has used medical aid and vaccines to leverage its diplomatic influence. An extensive interactive report by *ChinaPower* measures the scope and impact of China's COVID diplomacy. This report finds that China's public health diplomacy operates bilaterally and is not motivated by need or reciprocity, but rather a desire to strengthen political ties. This aid frequently comes with "strings attached", and recipient countries are expected to support China's foreign policy goals.

China's influence campaigns are increasingly organised by so-called "keyboard warriors" rather than Party-State bureaucrats. Chinese activists are mobilising on international social media platforms to expand China's international influence. An article by the *China Media Project* describes how the term "keyboard warrior", or jiànpánxiá (键盘侠), is used outside of China the term to refer to online Chinese nationalists who defend China on international social media forums against "unpatriotic" comments. A recent article by academics Tian Yang and Kecheng Fang in the journal *Information, Communication & Society* notes the similarities between the alt-right movement in the US and the nationalist narratives pushed by these "keyboard warriors".

In some cases, it can be difficult to distinguish between genuine Chinese nationalist activism and state-sponsored campaigns. Cybersecurity group Mandiant Threat Intelligence uncovered evidence that a pro-China influence group is attempting to use international social media platforms to mobilise physical protests in the US around COVID-19 concerns. The report does not identify the actors behind this campaign.

New domestic surveillance approaches

In an era where data is power, Chinese officials are keen to force large technology companies to hand their user data over to the state. The *BBC* reports that Chinese regulators want to break up Alipay, a Chinese payment app with over a billion users, in its latest drive to rein in big technology firms. If the regulator is successful in cracking down on Alipay, the company would be forced to hand over its user data to the state. In another incident, the Hong Kong Free press report that Google has become the first US technology company to comply with requests from the Hong Kong government to disclose user data, following the introduction of the national security law.

Are China's cities becoming "smart"? An article by academics Jelena Große-Bley and Genia Kostka published in *Big Data and Society* explores the evolution of digital governance in Shenzhen, one of China's most prominent "smart cities". The authors find that within Shenzhen, data is increasingly becoming centralised, with power over smart platforms shifting from local administrators to central government.

First video games, now role-playing "script murders". Following Beijing's crackdown on young gamers and popular video sharing platform Douyin, *the China Media Project* reports that officials are

now looking to curb fandom culture by introducing restrictions on "script murder", or jubensha (剧本杀), amid claims from state media that the "supernatural and spiritual themes" may cause "psychological problems".

What is China's AI strategy?

Algorithms, and the scientists that develop them, need to "uphold socialist values" according to a Chinese regulatory body. *Reuters* report that Xi wants to recruit scientists from its domestic population who the "correct political inclination" amid China's escalating technology feud with the US. In a similar vein, China's Cyberspace Administration announced that algorithms need to be "fair and transparent" and "uphold socialist values".

The US and China are approaching AI education in very different ways. A report by the Center for Security and Emerging Technology notes that China is introducing mandated AI education in its high school curricula, as well as encouraging AI companies to train university students. In comparison, the US is introducing AI education initiatives in a more fragmented manner, and the quality of AI education varies by state. The report argues China's approach could lead to widespread integration of AI into the public education system, but the curricula may be of lesser quality than those found in the US.

The unforeseen effects of China's aggressive diplomacy on tech

Xi's diplomacy is more centralised and more aggressive. A recent article in the People's Daily quotes Xi Jinping attacking Party officials for "seeking good relations at the expense of principle" (hǎorén zhǔyì 好人主义). The China Leadership monitor notes that Xi has promised bring China "back to the central position on the world stage" by introducing a program of "greater diplomacy". This programme has created greater centralisation of diplomatic affairs within the Party-State system, as well as a more aggressive approach to diplomatic relations.

But this aggressive diplomatic approach has had unforeseen consequences on global technology supply chains. China placed an import ban on Australian coal last year in retaliation to Canberra's call for an investigation into the origins of COVID-19. The *Wall Street Journal* reports that this ban has led to widespread power outages within China, as well as impacting global computer chip supply chains.

Chinese news outlets and social media platforms have been celebrating the release of Huawei executive Meng Wanzhou from house arrest in Vancouver. The *BBC* reports that China's foreign ministry claimed that her charges were "fabricated" to suppress China's tech industry. Meanwhile, the US continues to prepare for a trial against Huawei.

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