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China Information Operations Newsletter 8 July 2021

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The China Information Operations Newsletter is edited by Hannah Bailey and Hannah Kirk, researchers at the [Programme on Democracy and Technology](#) (DemTech) at Oxford University. This newsletter is a **five minute read**.

CCP at 100: How The Party Continues to Consolidate Domestic Power

On 1st July the Chinese Communist Party celebrated its 100th anniversary. [Reuters reports](#) that in the lead-up to the celebrations, censorship within mainland China was tightened. Censorship teams working for ByteDance and Baidu received instructions to remove any negative or critical commentary about the anniversary. Authorities also made a number of arrests following the introduction of a law banning the defamation of national heroes. [China's cyber regulator even opened a hotline](#) to encourage

people to report online users that “distort” the Party’s history.

Journalists and social media users in mainland China have long been subject to censorship, but officials are now keen to also curtail critics in Hong Kong where journalists had previously enjoyed greater freedom to criticise the Party. Since China imposed a national security law last year, many Hong Kong-based publications have fallen in line with official Beijing messaging. However, for a period of time the tabloid Apple Daily remained defiant. Yet, as many media outlets have reported (e.g., [the Atlantic](#)), recent arrests, raids and asset freezes have forced the tabloid to cease publication.

Censors within China face an important dilemma – with limited resources, where should they focus their censorship efforts? In their [article in The China Quarterly](#), Professors Mary Gallagher and Blake Miller find that censors focus more on who is posting rather than what they are posting. Rather than censor any content that is critical of the Party, the CCP is keen to limit the influence of non-Party “thought leaders”.

At the same time, the Cyberspace Administration of China is cracking down on companies violating data security regulations. As [Reuters reports](#), China’s cyber regulator ordered smartphone app stores to pull the ride-hailing firm Didi from their platforms. It claims that Didi illegally collected user data.

Beyond Domestic Audiences

A recent investigation by ProPublica revealed a coordinated influence campaign on YouTube designed to counter reports of human rights violations in Xinjiang. The campaign consists of thousands of videos of Uyghurs denying accusations of abuses or forced labour. The videos contain no logos or signs that they are part of an official campaign, and yet often contain similar key phrases, and were shared on multiple social media channels in a coordinated manner. A similar investigation by USA Today found that a five-part video series spreading disinformation on Xinjiang remained on YouTube for two years before being removed.

A report by the Australian Strategic Policy Institute has found that the Chinese state is actively targeting Chinese diaspora communities by co-opting the Stop Asian Hate movement. On multiple social platforms, accounts linked to the Chinese state are repeatedly using the #StopAsianHate hashtag to portray heightened speculation about Covid-19 laboratory-leak theories as part of a broader anti-Asian narrative.

International Cyber Power: China’s Strengths and Weaknesses

A fifteen country study by the Institute for Strategic Studies on national cyber power capabilities found that while China is capable of conducting offensive cyber operations against other states, it is limited by its poor security. The study notes that China’s focus on domestic content censorship has meant that it has neglected other forms of more physical network-focussed cyber security. Ultimately, the report concludes that China will be unable to equal the cyber capabilities of the US for at least a decade.

An interactive tool by the Australian Strategic Policy Institute tracks the international expansion of 27 of China’s major technology companies. One interesting case study is ZTE’s expansion in Europe. While ZTE has been hit by sanctions in the US, it has continued to expand within Europe.

The recent book **“Global China: Assessing China’s Growing Role in the World”** provides a comprehensive overview of China’s emergence as a global economic and military power.

Notably, it contains chapters on the emergence of critical technologies and how China is increasingly shaping global governance and norms.

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