China Information Operations Newsletter 2 March 2022

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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 **a 6 minute read**.

What are China's netizens saying about Ukraine?

On China's highly censored internet forums, Russia's invasion of Ukraine is trending. But netizens are largely in support of Putin's attack, The New York Times reports. Putin's framing of the war as a response to Western aggression has resonated with nationalist Chinese social media users. Over a billion users have viewed a clip of a Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesperson stating "NATO still owes the Chinese people a debt of blood."

But not all social media users in China are pro-war, and censors have been busy. Reuters reports that some social media users expressed solidarity with Ukraine, and The Washington Post finds some evidence of small-scale protests in support of Ukraine. But TechCrunch reveals Chinese social media censors are removing many anti-war posts, including over 4,000 Weibo posts deemed to have "provoked war, made fun of the war, or spread vulgar content."

Despite this, five Chinese historians have written an open letter denouncing the invasion. The authors argue that Russia's actions are wrong, and China should make this clear to its people and the international community.

Will these anti-war voices change public opinion? Research published in the Journal of Politics finds in China, citizens that are dissatisfied with the regime are often at the fringes of society. This limits their ability to sway public opinion.

Eileen Gu, Zhu Yi and "The Chained Woman"

A video of a woman chained by her neck has sparked a rare online revolt. The so-called "chained woman" has become a symbol of injustice and mobilised a widespread movement against the government for failing to eradicate human trafficking and forced marriage. While Chinese authorities censored a letter challenging Beijing to investigate the case, it failed to silence widespread online dissent.

Why were censors not more active in removing public criticism of Chinese authorities? Research published in Political Research Quarterly suggests that China scales up its censorship efforts during key policy shifts or political ceremonies, and focusses less on censoring mass protests.

Amidst outcry about "the chained woman," official Chinese media was keen to focus on Eileen Gu's Olympic successes. The New York Times reports some social media users were outraged by the propaganda push behind California-raised Eileen Gu, in contrast to the silencing of "chained woman." Eileen Gu was also criticised by netizens for promoting the use of VPNs, which are illegal in China.

Despite this, Eileen Gu received widespread praise by social media users for her performance, while fellow US-born athlete Zhu Yi faced harsh criticism. Both athletes were US-born and competed for China. But, while Eileen Gu's victory prompted online celebration, Zhu Yi's last place finish in the women's figure skating led to widespread abuse.

Censorship and hashtag astroturfing at the Olympics

During the Olympics, pro-China accounts flooded the Twitter hashtag #GenocideGames to drown out criticism of China's human rights abuses. The Wall Street Journal reports attempts by advocacy groups to raise awareness about human rights abuses in Xinjiang were diluted by pro-China accounts flooding the hashtag.

International athletes revealed they used burner phones to protect sensitive data while competing in China. Wired reports the athletes took measures to protect their personal data, and were also warned against speaking out about China's human rights abuses. Chinese officials also ordered athletes to delete photos of flooding inside their accommodation in the athletes village.

The power of film

Chinese websites are altering the content of Western TV shows and films in China. Recently, authorities censored the ending of the movie "Fight Club." After widespread backlash, Tencent restored the original ending. In a similar incident, several Chinese streaming platforms were accused of removing LGBT content from the TV-show "Friends."

Meanwhile, Chinese propaganda films are becoming increasingly popular among domestic audiences. The Economist reports the propaganda film "The Battle at Lake Changjin" recently made over $900m, making it the highest-grossing film in Chinese history. Research published in Comparative Political Studies indicates that successful authoritarian propaganda campaigns use a diversity of propaganda. This typically consists of mixture of "soft propaganda," including films and TV shows, alongside "harder" nationalist propaganda.

International influence operations

Multiple Western news organisations were targeted by a China-linked hack. The Wall Street Journal reports it was a target of a hack, alongside Dow Jones, the New York Post, the company's UK news operation and News Corp headquarters. The hack targeted journalists' emails and documents and was reportedly an intelligence gathering operation.

The US has banned the telecoms company China Unicom due to growing security concerns. This follows the separate company, China Telecom, had its US licence revoked in October. These security concerns reflect growing concern over China's growing international influence capabilities. A report by the Institute for Strategic Research provides a comprehensive overview of China's existing international influence operations. The report notes that China's influence tactics are increasingly similar to those used by Russia.

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