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China Information Operations Newsletter 8 December 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 6 minute read**.

The Booming International Propaganda Industry

Private companies are bidding for contracts to “tell China’s story well” on social media platforms. [ChinaTalk](#) finds that China is moving beyond its traditional “50 cent army” strategy of paying individuals to post propaganda on social media. Instead, local governments are contracting private

companies to conduct large-scale campaigns.

In the last month, both Facebook and Twitter uncovered large-scale Chinese-state sponsored campaigns on their platforms. [Analysis by ASPI](#) reveals that Twitter removed a network of thousands of Chinese state-backed accounts spreading disinformation about Xinjiang. [Facebook also removed](#) a network of 524 accounts involved in a coordinated campaign to amplify COVID-19 disinformation. Yet, while Facebook removed these inauthentic networks, they also released a [white paper written only in Chinese](#) to help PR companies within China effectively use Facebook to access and influence foreign audiences.

Are these campaigns effective? [The Alliance for Securing Democracy](#) finds that China's COVID-19 disinformation campaigns are amplified by search engines. Yet, despite these widespread campaigns, a report by the [CSIS China Power Project](#) reveals that these campaigns have had limited impact on global perceptions of China.

Strategic Silencing and Targeted Surveillance

China's Henan province is developing surveillance technologies to track journalists and international students. Surveillance research firm [IPVM discovered](#) that the Chinese tech company Neusoft were awarded a contract to track "key personnel". The proposed surveillance network would use millions of public cameras alongside smartphone data collection and facial recognition to locate targets.

Chinese authorities are cracking down on VPN usage within China, the South China Morning Post reports. China's internet regulator has released a draft of new regulations limiting the use of VPNs, which allow internet users to bypass the "Great Firewall" and access censored international websites.

Chinese technology companies are censoring Uyghur and Tibetan language posts. [Protocol reports](#) that the language-learning app Talkmate and streaming service Bilibili have recently started censoring content posted in these languages. This crackdown occurs alongside the [revelation](#) that top Chinese leaders, including Xi Jinping, directly ordered measures that led to mass internment in Xinjiang.

How China is Wielding Data Power

Data is a powerful resource in the 21st century, and China's control over domestic and international data flows have other countries worried. This month the head of MI6 gave a rare [interview](#) in which he warned that China has the capacity "harvest data from around the world" and build "data traps" to erode other countries' data sovereignty.

In recent years, China has also constructed a framework that enables the CCP to control domestic and extraterritorial data flows. A [guest editorial in the New York Times](#) details how Beijing has both tightened control over domestic data infrastructures, alongside absorbing data from other countries. As part of these efforts, and in a bid to ensure that this data facilitates economic growth, [Protocol reports](#) that a new "big data exchange" has recently opened in Shanghai.

But the big question is – does China's approach to data governance help or hinder innovation? An [article by David Karpa and co-authors](#) finds that China's approach to big data and artificial intelligence research has an overall negative effect on innovation. In the book [Retrofitting Leninism](#), Dimitar Gueorguiev argues that the Chinese Party-State is predominantly interested in using data and technology to increase its responsiveness to potential social unrest, rather than innovation.

Chinese State Media's Response to Peng Shuai

Following Peng Shuai's sexual assault allegations against former Vice-Premier Zhang Gaoli, Chinese state media outlets have been attempting to allay concerns for her welfare. The [China Media Project](#) has compiled various social media posts from Chinese state-backed media outlets claiming that Peng is safe and well. These social media posts were met with suspicion, and the international community continues to voice concern for her ability to communicate freely.

On Saturday, China released a white paper titled "Democracy that Works" in which it described its governance framework as a "whole-process people's democracy". In an article on the white paper, state-backed media outlet the [Global Times](#) argues that "China's democracy is more extensive, more genuine and more effective than the US democracy".

In a similar effort to exercise narrative power, Xi Jinping used the Chinese Communist Party's Sixth Plenum to rewrite China's past and entrench 'Xi Jinping Thought'. The [Wall Street Journal](#) notes that for the first time since the Deng Xiaoping era, the CCP has produced a formal resolution on party history, establishing 'Xi Jinping Thought' as historical truth.

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