China Information Operations Newsletter 5 November 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 a 6 minute read.

Disinformation Campaigns, Censorship Crackdowns and ... Lobsters?

A co-ordinated network of 500 inauthentic Twitter accounts linked to China has been pushing the conspiracy theory that COVID-19 was imported to Wuhan through lobsters from Maine. An investigation by Marcel Schliebs, a researcher with the Programme on Democracy and Technology,

together with NBC, found that these accounts posted Tweets in twenty languages for at least a month in an attempt to convince audiences that Covid-19 originated in the US. While the impact of this campaign appears to be limited, a study by researchers Cary Wu et al. found that the Chinese government's extensive censorship and propaganda campaigns have improved Chinese citizen's opinion of their government's handling of the pandemic. According to the BBC, Patriotic bloggers have even taken to attacking domestic medical experts who criticise China's COVID-19 strategy.

Disinformation campaigns are not the only tool in Beijing's narrative-control toolkit. The Financial Times reports that the Cyberspace Administration of China has removed Caixin, a well-known financial news outlet, from its list of media sources approved for domestic republishing. This is part of a wider government push to consolidate control over content production. Some social media platforms and content producers, including Yahoo, Linkedin and Epic Games, have exited China rather than abide by government censorship orders. The BBC notes that government censors have also targeted at least nine popular religious apps, including Quran Majeed and Olive Tree's Bible app, which have been removed from mainland app stores.

These large disinformation and censorship campaigns are part of Xi Jinping's heavy reliance on media power to maintain support among the domestic population. In an article published in the Journal of Contemporary China, Ashley Esarey finds that Xi relies on propaganda to support his rule far more than previous leaders. The article argues that Xi uses domestic media outlets to reinforce support for his leadership, while also de-emphasising previous historical leaders and removing potential rivals.

China's Growing AI Capabilities

Last month, nine government agencies published a set of objectives for "algorithmic security" regulation. Stanford's DigiChina provides a translation of the document titled "Guiding Opinions on Strengthening Overall Governance of Internet Information Service Algorithms." The document emphasises the need to adhere to "Xi Jinping's Thoughts on Socialism with Chinese Characteristics," as well as forming robust Internet and algorithmic governance policies, developing a better algorithm risk monitoring system, and enhancing algorithmic transparency, among other objectives.

A recent white paper on China's computing capacity reveals that China has the highest share of "smart" computing power. Oxford researcher Jeffrey Ding provides a translation of the "White Paper on China's Computing Power Development Index." The white paper claims that while China's overall computing power ranks second only to the US, it possesses 52% of global smart computing power, with the US trailing at 19%. Meanwhile, Axios reports that recent trends indicate China will surpass the AI capabilities of the US in the next decade.

An analysis of 66,000 People's Liberation Army (PLA) purchase records reveals that PLA spending on AI-technology is similar to that of the US, with a focus on purchasing equipment that can identify undersea vehicles and track ships. Analysis by the Center for Security and Emerging Technology finds that the PLA spends an estimated $1.6 billion USD on AI systems, which is mostly used for intelligence analysis, information warfare, and autonomous vehicles.

Repressive Surveillance Systems in Xinjiang

Surveillance technologies have been used extensively in Xinjiang to enforce loyalty and stability among the Uyghur population. A report by the Australian Strategic Policy Institute unpacks how the Chinese Communist Party governs Xinjiang. While the report highlights the role that surveillance technologies play in repressing the Uyghur population, it also finds that this technology is used in conjunction with mass propaganda campaigns, grassroots human intelligence operations, and

harsh legal punishments.

In his recent book "In the Camps — China's High-Tech Penal Colony", anthropologist Darren Byler tells the stories of Uyghurs and Kazakhs living in Xinjiang under extensive surveillance systems. Byler writes that individuals are often involuntarily detained for "pre-crimes", which can include mosque attendance, detected by the surveillance systems. This surveillance infrastructure enables the Party-State's repression of ethnic groups within the region.

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