

# Beijing's Global Megaphone:

The Expansion of Chinese Communist Party Media Influence since 2017

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# SPECIAL REPORT

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### ON THE COVER

A consumer at a newsstand in the Kenya’s capital reads a copy of the Africa edition of *China Daily* newspaper.  
(Photo Credit: TONY KARUMBA/AFP via Getty Images)

## Executive Summary

“Wherever the readers are, wherever the viewers are, that is where propaganda reports must extend their tentacles.”  
— Xi Jinping, February 2016<sup>2</sup>

A widely used digital television service in Kenya includes Chinese state television in its most affordable package while omitting international news outlets.<sup>3</sup> Portuguese television launches a prime-time “China Hour” featuring content from Chinese state media.<sup>4</sup> Chinese diplomats intimidate a cable executive in Washington, DC, to keep New Tang Dynasty Television (NTDTV), a station founded by Chinese Americans who practice Falun Gong, off the air.<sup>5</sup> And a partly Chinese-owned South African newspaper abruptly ends a writer’s column after he discusses repression in China’s Xinjiang region.<sup>6</sup>

These examples, which have come to light over the past three years, illustrate the various ways in which Chinese Communist Party (CCP) media influence—in the form of censorship, propaganda, and control over content-delivery systems—extend beyond the borders of mainland China to reach countries and audiences around the globe.

The report below updates and expands on a 2013 study by the same author, *The Long Shadow of Chinese Censorship: How the Communist Party’s Media Restrictions Affect News Outlets around the World*, published by the Center for International Media Assistance at the National Endowment for Democracy.<sup>7</sup> Drawing on recent scholarly research, media reports, interviews, Chinese government documents, and official speeches, the present report addresses the following questions:

- What are the **goals** of the CCP’s efforts to influence media outlets and news reporting globally?
- How does the CCP **promote** state media content and desired narratives internationally, while deploying various tactics to **suppress** critical news reporting?
- How have these dynamics **evolved** over the past three years under the consolidated CCP leadership of Xi Jinping?
- To what extent do the CCP’s efforts appear to be **achieving** the desired effect?

- How are governmental and nongovernmental actors **responding** to the challenges to press freedom and democratic governance posed by the covert, corrupt, and coercive aspects of the CCP’s transnational media influence?

The CCP and various Chinese government entities have long sought to influence public debate and media coverage about China outside the country, particularly among Chinese-language communities and through obstruction of foreign correspondents within China. However, over the past decade, top CCP officials have overseen a dramatic expansion in efforts to shape media content and narratives around the world, affecting every region and multiple languages.

The emerging result is a multifaceted, adaptive, and complex set of tactics that are deployed across varied environments. They combine widely accepted forms of public diplomacy with more covert, corrupt, and coercive activities that undermine democratic norms, reduce national sovereignty, weaken the financial sustainability of independent media, and violate the laws of some countries.<sup>8</sup>

Some of these dynamics can be traced back to the 1990s, but certain features have broadened and deepened in recent years. The trend is fueled by the paradoxical insecurity of the CCP, whose leaders feel threatened domestically even as they grow more emboldened internationally.

The global expansion of CCP media influence began in earnest during the tenure of former Chinese president Hu Jintao, and as current president Xi Jinping has tightened ideological controls at home, he has also been especially focused on intensifying propaganda efforts abroad. Under his direction, Beijing’s representatives and proxies have adopted a more aggressive and comprehensive approach to foreign media

Since 2017, Beijing has accelerated its global media influence campaigns and deployed new tactics.

influence operations. In an October 2015 article, media studies professor Anne-Marie Brady found that Xi has used his highly concentrated political power to personally initiate this change, raising China's foreign propaganda efforts to "a new level of assertiveness, confidence, and ambition."<sup>9</sup> Indeed, Chinese state media, government officials, and affiliated companies are achieving increased influence over key nodes in the global information flow, exploiting the more sophisticated technological environment, and showing a readiness to meddle in the internal political debates and electoral contests of other countries.

## Chinese state media content reaches hundreds of millions of television viewers, radio listeners, and social media users abroad.

### Key trends since 2017

The past three years have been marked by an acceleration of this process and the emergence of more new tactics. It is notable that during the same period, Xi further consolidated his power at the 19th Communist Party Congress in October 2017 and won approval for constitutional amendments that removed presidential term limits in March 2018. The following changes in Beijing's overseas media activities since early 2017 deserve special scrutiny:

- Russian-style social media disinformation campaigns and efforts to manipulate search results on global online platforms have been attributed to China-based perpetrators.
- Tactics that were once used primarily to co-opt Chinese diaspora media and suppress critical coverage in overseas Chinese-language publications are now being applied—with some effect—to local mainstream media in various countries.
- Beijing is gaining influence over crucial parts of some countries' information infrastructure, as Chinese technology firms with close ties to the CCP build or acquire content-dissemination platforms used by tens of millions of foreign news consumers.
- There is evidence that Chinese-owned social media platforms and digital television providers in multiple

regions have engaged in politicized content manipulation to favor pro-Beijing narratives.

- Chinese officials are making a more explicit effort to present China as a model for other countries, and they are taking concrete steps to encourage emulation through trainings for foreign personnel and technology transfers to foreign state-owned media outlets.

The CCP's efforts have had a clear impact on the ground. China's image and Xi's own profile have improved in key parts of the world. Coverage of the potential downsides of China's foreign investments has been stifled in some countries. And Chinese state media content reaches hundreds of millions of television viewers, radio listeners, and social media users abroad, in many cases without transparency as to its origins. At the same time, ongoing efforts to co-opt or marginalize independent Chinese diaspora news outlets and censor critical views on Chinese-owned social media platforms like Tencent's WeChat have reduced overseas Chinese audiences' access to unbiased information about events in China, their home countries' relationship with Beijing, and other topics of relevance to their day-to-day lives. More broadly, many of the tactics that the CCP employs to influence media around the world also serve to undermine international norms and fundamental features of democratic governance, including transparency, the rule of law, and fair competition.

There are certainly limits to Beijing's influence and the attractiveness of known state media content among international news consumers. Moreover, as societies gain awareness of the CCP's activities and their potential long-term costs, more governments, journalists, technology companies, and civic activists are responding with initiatives to increase transparency, diversify funding sources, and protect media freedom. Many of these projects have scored successes, effectively countering some of the problematic dimensions of Beijing's media influence campaigns.

Nevertheless, the fact remains that an economically powerful authoritarian state is rapidly expanding its influence over media production and dissemination channels around the world. To help policymakers and other observers come to grips with the problem, this report offers an analytical framework for understanding the complexities and implications of global CCP media influence, as well as a summary of potential responses.

**CHAPTER 1****The goals of the CCP's global media influence**

The CCP's global media influence campaigns target both overseas Chinese and non-Chinese audiences. They have traditionally been designed to accomplish three primary aims, which are evident from official statements, analysis of state media content, and particular incidents involving CCP critics:

1. to promote a positive view of China and of the CCP's authoritarian regime;
2. to encourage foreign investment in China and openness to Chinese investment and strategic engagement abroad; and
3. to marginalize, demonize, or entirely suppress anti-CCP voices, incisive political commentary, and exposés that present the Chinese government and its leaders in a negative light.

For the overseas Chinese audience, programming and news coverage indicate the additional goal of promoting nationalistic sentiment and Taiwan's reunification with the mainland.

Some of these goals can be identified in Xi Jinping's own instructions regarding foreign propaganda, which have emphasized trying to "tell a good Chinese story." In a January 2014 speech, Xi explained his vision to CCP Politburo members:

*China should be portrayed as a civilized country featuring a rich history, ethnic unity, and cultural diversity, and as an Eastern power with good government, a developed economy, cultural prosperity, national unity, and beautiful scenery. China should also be known as a responsible country that advocates peace and development, safeguards international fairness and justice, [and] makes a positive contribution to humanity.<sup>10</sup>*

Such messaging omits the objectively negative dimensions of China's authoritarian political system and rapid economic development, ranging from environmental pollution to lack of rule of law and egregious human rights violations against



The front pages of major Chinese newspapers published June 21, 2019, reporting on Chinese President Xi Jinping's first state visit to North Korea. (Photo Credit: Kyodo News Stills via Getty Images)

## Beijing's messaging omits the objectively negative dimensions of China's authoritarian political system and rapid economic development.

ethnic and religious minorities. It also avoids the dark side of China's foreign engagement, which includes corrupt deal-making, elite capture, and the opaque accumulation of public debt.

In recent years, another narrative has also gained prominence. It presents China's authoritarian style of governance as a model for developing countries to emulate, while in some

cases explicitly challenging the attractiveness of democratic governance and US international leadership. In his speech at the CCP's 19th Congress in October 2017, for example, Xi argued that China's system offers "a new option for other countries and nations who want to speed up their development while preserving their independence."<sup>11</sup>

The CCP uses a variety of tactics to pursue its goals. These can usually be categorized as either propaganda, meaning the active promotion of Chinese government content and that of pro-Beijing media outlets, or censorship, meaning the suppression of information and obstruction of outlets that are critical of the regime. Increasingly, however, Beijing is also gaining more fundamental influence over key nodes in the flow of information abroad, as Chinese technology firms with close ties to the government build or acquire content-dissemination platforms that are used by tens of millions of foreign news consumers.

## China's Toolbox for Global Media Influence



**CHAPTER 2**

# Propaganda: How the CCP promotes its favored content and narratives abroad

The CCP employs a variety of methods to reach global audiences with approved content. These include building up the overseas capacity and presence of official state media, insinuating official views into foreign mainstream media, cultivating foreign outlets that can produce their own favorable content, acquiring or establishing new outlets, and conducting disinformation campaigns on global social media platforms.

## 1. Expanding the global capacity and presence of official state media

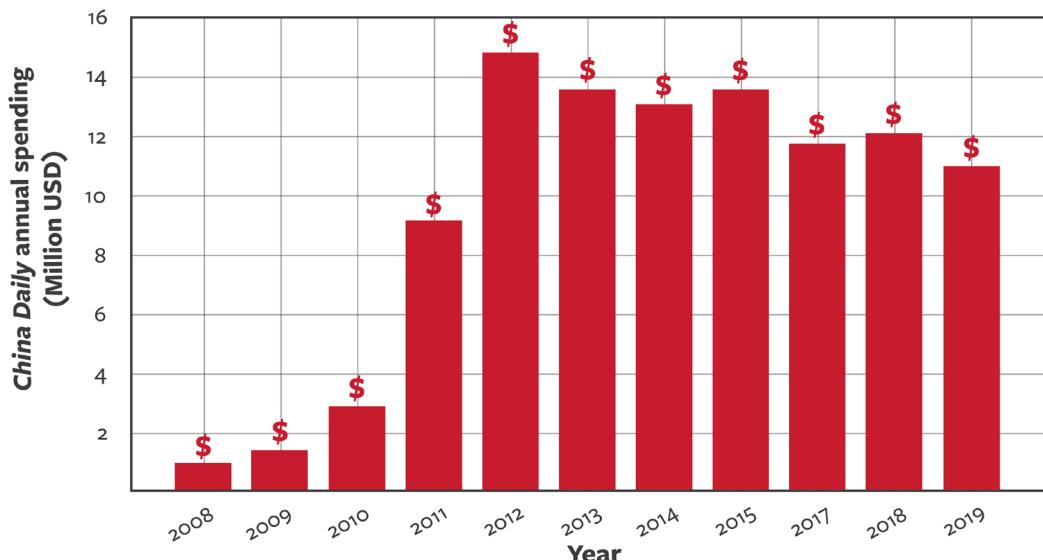
All of China's most prominent state-owned media outlets now have an international presence across the gamut of formats. The six most notable outlets are China Global Television Network (CGTN), the global service of state broadcaster China Central Television (CCTV); the English-language newspaper *China Daily*; the CCP mouthpiece *People's Daily*; China Radio International (CRI); and two

news agencies—Xinhua and China News Service. Most have a constellation of bureaus overseas and distribute content in multiple languages. For example, in addition to carrying CCTV programming in Chinese, CGTN broadcasts in English, Spanish, French, Arabic, and Russian to every region via satellite, cable, and IPTV (internet protocol television). *China Daily* is distributed in locations such as newsstands in New York City, hotels in Hong Kong, Kenya Airways flights, and congressional offices in Washington, DC. In Africa and the Middle East, Chinese state media have also developed unique publications geared toward local populations.<sup>12</sup>

In 2009, the Chinese government reportedly allocated \$6 billion to the global expansion of state media.<sup>13</sup> In 2017, scholar David Shambaugh estimated that China was spending as much as \$10 billion per year on enhancing its “soft power,” although state media would only account for a portion of that sum.<sup>14</sup> Complete budgetary information on the spending behind Chinese state media’s global expansion is not available,

## CHINA DAILY Chinese state-run newspaper expenditure in the U.S.

**中国日报**



**Source:** *China Daily* filings with the U.S. Department of Justice under the Foreign Agents Registration Act. The annual total is the sum of the reported expenditures from two filings submitted in that calendar year; the year 2016 is omitted due to missing data in one of the filings

[www.freedomhouse.org](http://www.freedomhouse.org)

but the known data points indicate a large and growing investment dedicated to increasing the reach and impact of these outlets. For example, based on *China Daily*'s annual filings with the US government under the Foreign Agents Registration Act (FARA), the paper's budget and expenditures in the United States have increased tenfold over the past decade, from about \$500,000 in the first half of 2009 to more than \$5 million in the latter half of 2019.<sup>15</sup> Similarly, in September 2018, Australian media reported that CGTN was engaged in a \$500 million advertising campaign—complete with billboards featuring kangaroos and pandas—to try to attract cable viewers.<sup>16</sup> Evidence has also emerged of multimillion-dollar contracts issued by outlets like Xinhua and China News Service to add followers and build influence on Twitter, which, ironically, is blocked in China.<sup>17</sup>

## All of China's major state media outlets have accounts on Twitter and Facebook, which are blocked in China.

Indeed, all of the major state outlets have accounts on Twitter and Facebook, and some are also active on YouTube and Instagram, which are similarly blocked inside China. In many cases they have multiple accounts divided by language, theme, or geographic location.<sup>18</sup> Each of the main accounts has garnered tens of millions of followers, particularly in the last three years. As of December 2019, CGTN's English account had 90 million followers—the largest for any media outlet on Facebook—of which 20 million had been added since November 2018. Three of the 10 media accounts on Facebook with the largest number of followers were Chinese state media. In addition, from mid-November to mid-December 2019, four of the five fastest-growing media pages on Facebook were Chinese state-run outlets: *Global Times*, CGTN, and two photo and culture pages run by Xinhua.<sup>19</sup> CGTN's French-language account had 20.3 million followers, CGTN Spanish had 15.7 million, CGTN Arabic had 14.4 million, and CGTN Russian had some 1 million.<sup>20</sup> Interestingly, the Chinese-language accounts belonging to the same outlets have a much smaller following. For example, CCTV's Chinese account on Facebook had just 3.75 million followers as of December 2019.<sup>21</sup>

These numbers raise a variety of questions and concerns.

First, observers have speculated on how many of the followers are genuine given the relatively low rate of comments per post, compared with competitors like Cable News Network (CNN) of the United States or the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC).<sup>22</sup> But in April 2019, Facebook told the *Economist* that it had found only a tiny number of fake followers of Chinese state media pages.<sup>23</sup>

Second, although the accounts are clearly managed by these media outlets, a degree of deception is evident in how they identify themselves. A review of several of the main accounts found that none reveal their state ownership or CCP editorial control. Even the *People's Daily*, the party's official mouthpiece, describes itself simply as “the biggest newspaper in China.”<sup>24</sup> CGTN bills itself as “China’s preeminent 24-hour news channel,” and Xinhua refers to itself as “the first port of call for the latest and exclusive China and world news.”<sup>25</sup> Facebook users who are unfamiliar with these outlets’ true nature could easily mistake them for independent, privately owned entities. This may change in the future, as Facebook announced in October 2019 that it planned to begin labeling state-owned media as such.<sup>26</sup>

Third, the accounts regularly run ads on Facebook to recruit followers. Many of the advertisements include images of pandas, the Great Wall, or modern subjects like a high-speed train, coupled with text that encourages users to follow the account and learn about China. The accounts' current number of followers appears at the bottom of the ads, suggesting a degree of legitimacy and existing public trust. The ads run in multiple languages and target users in countries around the world. In some cases they run exclusively in developing regions like South and Southeast Asia, Latin America, and the Middle East rather than in developed countries like the United States. Some of these advertisements are flagged by Facebook as political. They may contain content on a recent speech by Xi Jinping, commentary on the US-China trade war, or promotional material on the Belt and Road Initiative.<sup>27</sup>

Fourth, sprinkled among run-of-the-mill posts about pandas, development projects, and Chinese culture, more aggressive and negative content targeting perceived CCP enemies has appeared over the past year. During the summer of 2019, CGTN's English page published several videos likening Hong Kong protesters to terrorist groups or repeating proven fabrications about them, such as a report claiming that protesters carrying toy weapons were armed with a US-made grenade launcher.<sup>28</sup> A few months later, in December, a

## Chinese State Media Misleading Taglines

Chinese state media outlets are active on global social media platforms like Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, and Instagram, which are blocked in China. They have accrued large followings, thanks in part to promotional ads and deceptive descriptions that obscure their state-run origins.

Media outlet	Facebook self-identification	Actual identity	Facebook Followers (Main account, December 2019)
 People's Daily	“The biggest newspaper in China”	Official mouthpiece of the Chinese Communist Party	72 million
 Xinhua News Agency	“The first port of call for the latest and exclusive China and world news”	Official Chinese state-owned news wire	70 million
 China Global Television Network	“China’s preeminent 24-hour news channel”	International arm of state-owned broadcaster China Central Television	90 million
 China Daily	“The leading English-language news organization in China”	Chinese state-owned English-language newspaper	84 million

series of graphic and disturbing “documentaries” about the supposed terrorist threat posed by Uighurs were posted by CGTN’s English, Spanish, and French Facebook pages in an apparent effort to rebut international criticism of the Chinese government’s mass internment and forced indoctrination of Muslim ethnic minorities in Xinjiang.<sup>29</sup> Within hours of being posted, one of the English videos had garnered over 25,000 views, a relatively high number for CGTN content. These examples demonstrate how media channels that are built over time using misleading advertising and soft content can be activated in a crisis to deliver harsh CCP propaganda to large global audiences.

### 2. Insinuating official views into foreign mainstream media

While Chinese state media are working to break into new markets and expand their global audiences, dissemination

strategies that rely on these outlets still have a limited reach. Therefore, the Chinese government has developed a considerable aptitude for incorporating official views into foreign programming and publications that reach a wider, more mainstream audience.

One successful method has been for top diplomats and officials to submit opinion articles or provide interviews to major foreign outlets. From 2014 to 2017, for instance, China’s ambassador to **Argentina** authored 14 op-eds and granted 10 interviews to local media,<sup>30</sup> in addition to personally visiting local newsrooms eight times.<sup>31</sup> In late 2018, as China faced increased international condemnation due to the government’s persecution of Muslim minorities in Xinjiang, Chinese diplomats reached out to local media to defend Beijing’s policies. Examples included an opinion piece published in the *Jakarta Post* by China’s ambassador to

**Indonesia**, letters from China's ambassador in the **United Kingdom** to the *Economist* and the *Financial Times*, and interviews of China's ambassador to the **United States** by both National Public Radio, which is popular among more liberal audiences, and Fox News, a leading conservative station.<sup>32</sup> In November, an opinion piece under Xi Jinping's own name was published in **Papua New Guinea** ahead of his visit for the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) summit.<sup>33</sup>

## The Chinese government has developed an aptitude for incorporating official content into foreign outlets that reach a mainstream audience.

While this type of media outreach is a common tool of public diplomacy, Chinese state media have also used more unusual and arguably more opaque methods to exploit foreign media outlets. Chinese officials and state media documents have referred to this practice as “borrowing the boat to reach the sea” (借船出海). One of the most prominent examples is the periodic inclusion of a paid news-like advertising supplement from *China Daily* called China Watch in the print editions of papers like the *Washington Post*, the *New York Times*, the *Wall Street Journal*, and the *Los Angeles Times*. Similar advertorial inserts have appeared in major newspapers in other parts of the world, including in **Spain**, the **United Kingdom**,<sup>34</sup> **Australia**,<sup>35</sup> **Argentina**, **Peru**,<sup>36</sup> **Senegal**,<sup>37</sup> and **India**.<sup>38</sup> In the case of the *Washington Post* and some other publications, China Watch also appears as an online feature, further blurring the lines between Chinese state media content and the host outlet's own reporting.

A second tactic, particularly relevant to the news agencies Xinhua and China News Service, involves providing content free of charge to partner media. This approach has become especially prominent among Chinese-language outlets serving the diaspora. A November 2018 investigation by the *Financial Times* found that “party-affiliated outlets were reprinting or broadcasting their content in at least 200 nominally independent Chinese-language publications around the world,” the result of a sharp uptick in content-sharing

agreements in 2016–17 compared with previous years.<sup>39</sup> In most cases, the content appears to have been provided for free and published “under the masthead of the overseas news organizations,” making it appear native to the independent publication, even if a small note identifies the original source.

Such agreements are not limited to Chinese-language publications. Xinhua has signed cooperation pacts with a wide range of media outlets in both free and repressive settings around the world. The precise terms of the deals are not always made public, but in at least some instances, Xinhua provides free text and photos to its partners. Over the past two years, the news agency has signed exchange agreements with local counterparts in countries including **Australia**,<sup>40</sup> **Italy**,<sup>41</sup> **Bangladesh**,<sup>42</sup> **India**,<sup>43</sup> **Nigeria**,<sup>44</sup> **Egypt**,<sup>45</sup> **Thailand**,<sup>46</sup> **Vietnam**,<sup>47</sup> **Belarus**,<sup>48</sup> and **Laos**.<sup>49</sup>

Content-exchange agreements and other forms of cooperation extend beyond newswires and print publications to television and radio programming as well. The 2018 *Financial Times* investigation found that CCTV provides “free video footage and television scripts to 1,700 smaller foreign news organizations and media groups.” In recent years, arrangements of this kind have led to the airing of Chinese-produced documentaries and other news or entertainment programming on local stations. In 2011, for example, **Zimbabwe**’s government agreed to share news programming between its state-run television station and CCTV. In 2014, the Thai News Network entered an agreement with Xinhua to broadcast the latter’s *China Report* program in **Thailand** on a daily basis.<sup>50</sup> TV **Peru**’s Channel 7 broadcast 12 documentaries about China surrounding the APEC forum in Lima in 2016, nearly all of which were produced by CGTN and aired during prime time.<sup>51</sup> In January 2018, a delegation from China International Television Corporation, a CCTV subsidiary, reportedly returned from a conference in the United States with deals to air the Spanish-dubbed

### COUNTRY CASE STUDY



The **Venezuela**-based regional broadcaster TeleSUR has partnered with CGTN Español since 2016 to coproduce *Prisma*, a cultural program.

version of a Chinese-produced drama on “state TV of Latin American countries such as **Colombia**, **Peru**, and **Mexico**.<sup>52</sup> State media content has also appeared on radio stations. In November 2015, a Reuters investigation revealed that programming from the state-funded CRI was appearing on stations in 14 countries, including 15 US cities, often via privately owned intermediaries.<sup>53</sup> By 2018, the *Guardian* reported, such content was airing on 58 stations in 35 countries.<sup>54</sup>

In other cases, cooperation takes the form of coproduction. For example, during 2017, the China Intercontinental Communication Center collaborated with Image Nation in the **United Arab Emirates** (UAE) to produce and air China-centered documentaries on Image Nation’s Quest Arabia station, which broadcasts to 45 million households in 22 countries in the Middle East.<sup>55</sup> In June 2018, media reports surrounding Xi Jinping’s visit to the UAE indicated that the partnership might go further and entail creation of a 24-hour Chinese television station targeting the Middle East.<sup>56</sup> In mid-2017, CGTN and the Argentinian network Grupo América coproduced a series of 30-minute documentaries on the theme of China and **Argentina**’s long-standing diplomatic relationship.<sup>57</sup> Similarly, the **Venezuela**-based regional broadcaster TeleSUR, owned by a group of Latin American governments, has partnered with CGTN Español since 2016 to coproduce *Prisma*, a cultural program.<sup>58</sup> And in October 2019 in **Germany**, the public station Northern German Broadcasting (NDR) came under criticism for airing the current affairs program *Dialogue with China*, which was coproduced with a controversial CGTN host.<sup>59</sup>

### **3. Cultivating foreign media that can produce their own favorable content**

Not all pro-CCP propaganda that appears in foreign countries is produced or even coproduced by Chinese state media. Chinese diplomats and other officials have gone to great lengths to develop “friendly” relations with private media owners and reporters, encouraging them to create their own content that promotes key narratives favored by Beijing. Chinese diaspora outlets and media owners whose coverage serves the CCP’s interests are frequently rewarded with advertising, lucrative contracts for other enterprises, joint ventures, and even political appointments.

One of the starker outcomes of this dynamic has been the participation of privately owned news outlets in publishing or airing coerced confessions by Chinese prisoners of

### COUNTRY CASE STUDY



People in five Chinese provinces artificially boosted fake news stories about a politician in **Taiwan** in Google search results.

conscience and other victims of state repression. An April 2018 report by the rights group Safeguard Defenders examined 45 such confessions recorded between 2013 and 2018, 60 percent of which featured journalists, bloggers, book publishers, lawyers, or activists. Although CCTV has been the outlet most closely associated with recording and distributing the confessions, privately owned **Hong Kong** news outlets that have a large global audience—including Phoenix TV, the Chinese-language *Oriental Daily*, and the English-language *South China Morning Post*—have been implicated as well.<sup>60</sup>

Beijing has also used subsidized trips or “trainings” in China to cultivate foreign journalists directly.<sup>61</sup> According to some past participants from **Pakistan** and **Sri Lanka**, the visiting journalists are made to understand that their hosts expect them to reciprocate for the well-funded events by producing content that promotes the CCP’s preferred narratives.<sup>62</sup>

The Chinese government similarly forges relationships with current and former officials in foreign countries, who often benefit professionally or financially and can act as informal defenders of Beijing’s views in local media. For example, **New Zealand** lawmaker Todd McClay recently referred to the forced indoctrination camps for Muslim minorities in Xinjiang as “vocational training centers,” echoing the terminology used by the Chinese government and state media to justify the mass detentions.<sup>63</sup> Gerhard Schröder, the former

**Chinese state media and “friendly” privately owned news outlets have published or aired coerced confessions by Chinese prisoners of conscience to global audiences.**

chancellor of **Germany**, dismissed reports of the camps as mere “gossip” in a 2018 interview with Reuters.<sup>64</sup> McClay had represented his political party in a December 2017 dialogue in Beijing organized by the CCP’s International Liaison Department,<sup>65</sup> and Schroeder is known for having profited after leaving office by aiding German companies in their contacts with Chinese government and party officials.<sup>66</sup>

#### 4. Purchasing foreign media outlets and establishing new networks

In a number of documented cases, entities with links to the Chinese government have purchased or established their own news outlets to disseminate pro-Beijing views. This practice matches Anne-Marie Brady’s 2015 prediction that the CCP would move from “borrowing the boat” to “buying the boat,” or purchasing stakes in foreign media enterprises. In 2018, investors believed to have close ties to the CCP-friendly Phoenix TV moved to purchase a radio station in **Mexico** near the border with the United States, raising suspicions that it would be used to broadcast pro-Beijing content to Chinese speakers in southern California.<sup>67</sup> But the pattern extends beyond diaspora media. Over the past decade, the Chinese outlet GBTimes has purchased stakes in or provided content to radio stations in **Hungary**, **Italy**, and elsewhere, airing daily cultural and news programs that portray China in a positive light.<sup>68</sup> These stations are among at least eight that GBTimes—founded by Chinese entrepreneur Zhao Yinong and significantly subsidized by CRI until 2017<sup>69</sup>—operates across Europe, reaching millions of listeners.<sup>70</sup>

Beijing’s international infrastructure investment program, the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), has served as a vehicle for media influence activities in partner countries. In June 2018, the state-affiliated All-China Journalists Association (ACJA) convened the Belt and Road Journalists Forum,<sup>71</sup> drawing nearly 100 representatives from media and journalism associations in 47 countries. One of the key goals of the forum and subsequent cooperation has been to “organize joint news collection and increase the sharing of

information.” At the forum’s conclusion, the ACJA was tasked with establishing a permanent secretariat for the forum and drafting rules for a Belt and Road journalists’ alliance.<sup>72</sup>

Less than a year later, in April 2019, China launched the Belt and Road News Network (BRNN), headquartered in Beijing and chaired by the *People’s Daily*. According to its founding charter, its leadership council includes 14 members from China and 26 others from 24 countries across Asia, Africa, Europe, North America, and the Middle East.<sup>73</sup> The network reportedly publishes news in six languages, although by late 2019 contributions appeared to be coming exclusively from the *People’s Daily*,<sup>74</sup> with no articles available in the “other members” portion of the content pool.<sup>75</sup> Not surprisingly, the content on BRNN’s English website is focused on touting the benefits of the BRI while omitting negative information about either the initiative or life in China under CCP rule.<sup>76</sup> The top story in mid-December was a profile of Xinjiang as a tourist destination and cultural hub.<sup>77</sup> It remains unclear how many member outlets are republishing BRNN’s content, but past initiatives of this kind on a more modest scale—like the Asia News Network<sup>78</sup>—have resulted in *China Daily* articles appearing in outlets across the region.

#### 5. Conducting disinformation campaigns on global social media platforms

The use of Russian-style disinformation campaigns on international social media platforms, which are blocked within China, has gained prominence over the past year as a relatively new tactic for promoting CCP narratives abroad, although the phenomenon apparently began as early as mid-2017. Previously, most evidence of this type of propaganda was observed on domestic platforms, according to the Oxford Internet Institute. But in 2019, the Chinese government displayed “new-found interest in aggressively using Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube.”<sup>79</sup>

The first campaign to draw international attention focused on the November 2018 municipal elections in **Taiwan**, and particularly the mayoral race in the southern city of Kaohsiung, in which an unlikely pro-China Kuomintang (KMT) candidate, Han Kuo-yu, emerged victorious in a traditional Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) stronghold. Fake news stories and doctored images originating in China, or from a network of websites suspected of links to Beijing, spread widely on social media, denigrating the DPP government. Some items were picked up and reported as fact by local news stations.<sup>80</sup> In mid-2019, new evidence indicated that

In 2019, the Chinese government displayed new-found interest in aggressively using global social media platforms to spread disinformation.

pro-Han Facebook groups had been created and administered by suspicious China-based users.<sup>81</sup> Subsequent research found cases of people in five Chinese provinces artificially boosting fake news stories about Han's opponent in Google search results, as well as efforts by Chinese government agents to purchase popular pro-Taiwan Facebook pages ahead of the 2020 general elections.<sup>82</sup>

Reports of other international campaigns came later in 2019. In August, Twitter announced that it had taken down over 900 accounts that were used as part of a Chinese state-directed disinformation campaign to undermine the credibility of antigovernment protesters in **Hong Kong**, and that it had also removed 200,000 new accounts associated with the network.<sup>83</sup> Facebook and YouTube announced similar account takedowns, but on a smaller scale.<sup>84</sup> Importantly, the social media firms published data about the accounts and the content they shared.

Analysis by the Australian Strategic Policy Institute (ASPI) and the *New York Times* revealed additional details about the tactics and targets of the Twitter network.<sup>85</sup> They found

that the same network had been active since mid-2017 and had previously been mobilized to smear a wide range of Chinese government critics located inside and outside China. These included US-based democracy activist Yang Jianli, self-exiled billionaire Guo Wengui, detained bookseller and Swedish citizen Gui Minhai, arrested human rights lawyer Yu Wensheng, and Chinese military veterans who were detained for protesting over unpaid benefits. It was only after all of these campaigns that the network turned its focus to the Hong Kong protesters and attracted Twitter's attention, resulting in its dismantling.

A number of the disinformation network's features are worth noting. First, much—but not all—of the content was in Chinese, both simplified (used on the mainland) and traditional (used in Hong Kong and Taiwan) depending on the topic, indicating that a key target audience was the Chinese diaspora. Second, the accounts were often bought on the black market rather than cultivated from scratch, as Russian operatives have done. Many of the purchased accounts had been devoted to spam and marketing. Still, some had over 10,000 followers, and they had previously



Screenshot of CGTN's Facebook page. As of December 2019, the global arm of China's state broadcaster had over 90 million followers on the platform, which is blocked in China. (Credit: Freedom House)

tweeted in 55 different languages. Third, the campaigns were less psychologically sophisticated and more hastily assembled than Moscow's effort during the 2016 US elections, particularly in terms of meaningful engagement with local users. Finally, many of the more political messages failed to go viral; the most frequently retweeted items from the network were often about sports or pornography.

The Chinese authorities' overseas use of social media disinformation may have been relatively crude to date, but they are learning fast. In **Taiwan**, where the Chinese social media operations are already more coordinated and sophisticated than those deployed globally, observers note that the disinformation is becoming harder to detect, particularly as the content shifts from simplified to traditional Chinese.<sup>86</sup> Moreover, despite Twitter's actions to remove the China-linked network, Chinese state-affiliated trolls are still apparently operating on the platform in large numbers. In the hours and days after Houston Rockets general manager Daryl Morey tweeted in support of Hong Kong protesters in October 2019, the *Wall Street Journal* reported, nearly 170,000 tweets were directed at Morey by users who seemed to be based in China as part of a coordinated intimidation campaign.<sup>87</sup> Meanwhile, there have been multiple suspected efforts by pro-Beijing trolls to manipulate the ranking of content on popular sources of information outside China, including Google's search engine,<sup>88</sup> Reddit,<sup>89</sup> and YouTube.<sup>90</sup>

interviews to foreign media, reaching global audiences with state-funded news broadcasts, or making arrangements for domestic entertainment content to air on foreign television networks.

Nevertheless, there are also clear patterns that suggest dishonesty and corruption. Efforts to disseminate state media content frequently lack transparency, and the deceptive self-identification of Chinese state media pages on Facebook extends to paid advertorial supplements. Many news-like inserts include a disclaimer stating that the content was paid for or even that it comes from a Chinese source, but rarely are the official ties of the relevant Chinese outlet made explicit.<sup>91</sup> In the case of free content embedded within foreign publications or broadcasts, Chinese state media may be credited, but the labeling is rarely prominent, and only news consumers who are already familiar with the outlets would be aware of its state or CCP affiliation. Coproductions and co-opted private media further obscure the political motivations driving certain reporting. And disinformation spread by networks of seemingly ordinary social media users is entirely opaque and deliberately mendacious.

The lack of transparency often extends to the economic arrangements surrounding various propaganda activities, such as the amount *China Daily* is paying for each advertorial, how many and which journalists are traveling to China on government-paid trips, or what financial benefits content-sharing agreements provide to each party. Such details would be of interest to civil society, policymakers, and the general public in many countries given the potential for corruption and the economic dependence they can create for foreign media outlets. The economic ties give Beijing crucial leverage, which it can use either implicitly or explicitly to suppress critical coverage and commentary, as explored in the next section of the report.

## The Chinese government and state media are spending hundreds of millions of dollars a year to spread their messages to audiences around the world.

### **Beijing's overseas propaganda: A potent blend of boldness and deception**

The Chinese government and state media are spending hundreds of millions of dollars a year to spread their messages to audiences around the world. Some of their activities fall within the scope of what might be deemed acceptable public diplomacy or "soft power" strategies used by other countries, including democratic governments. These include ambassadors publishing opinion pieces or granting

## CHAPTER 3

# Censorship: How the CCP suppresses critical news coverage abroad

Since coming to power in 1949, the CCP has constructed a multilayered system for censoring unwanted news and stifling dissent within China. Over the past three decades, aspects of this domestic apparatus have been adapted to impose some censorship on media outlets based outside the country. As with its propaganda efforts, the regime's transnational censorship operation uses a combination of overt and covert methods.

Ten years ago, the CCP's censorship of external media appeared to focus mainly on international outlets operating within China and Chinese-language outlets abroad, including those in Hong Kong and Taiwan. Efforts to influence the mainstream media in Africa, Latin America, Southeast Asia, and elsewhere was generally limited to propaganda—the promotion of Chinese state media content and narratives—rather than the suppression of critical local coverage.

But this appears be changing, particularly as Chinese entities increase their investments in other countries and grow more sensitive to local debates about China's role. Chinese officials have begun to use economic leverage to silence negative reporting or commentary in local-language media with greater frequency.

The CCP's efforts in this regard can be grouped into four main categories: direct action by Chinese government representatives, positive and negative incentives for self-censorship, indirect pressure through proxies, and physical or online attacks.

### **1. Direct action by Chinese government representatives**

Explicit interventions by Chinese officials can take place either inside or outside China and involve a range of individuals: Chinese diplomats, provincial or local officials, security agents, or regulators. Within China, local officials and their plainclothes enforcers obstruct foreign correspondents, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs delays or denies visa renewals for journalists,<sup>92</sup> central authorities arbitrarily block websites, and

**Chinese officials have begun to use economic leverage to silence negative reporting or commentary in local-language media with greater frequency.**

security forces detain family members of overseas journalists who produce critical reporting.<sup>93</sup> Recent examples include the denial of a visa to *Wall Street Journal* correspondent Chun Han Wong, blocks on the websites of outlets like the *Guardian* and the *Toronto Star*,<sup>94</sup> and the detention in indoctrination camps of relatives of Uighur journalists working for Radio Free Asia. The 2018 annual survey of the Foreign Correspondents' Club of China yielded "the darkest picture of reporting conditions inside China in recent memory," due in part to increased surveillance by security services that included hotel break-ins.<sup>95</sup> Such measures obstruct newsgathering, prevent the publication of undesirable content, and punish overseas media outlets and journalists when they fail to heed restrictions.

Outside China, diplomats press senior editors and media executives to alter critical coverage or attempt to intimidate journalists via phone calls and public shaming. In recent years, Chinese envoys appear to have become more aggressive in their confrontations, with notable incidents involving Chinese-language media in the **United States**,<sup>96</sup> as well as mainstream media in countries such as **Russia**,<sup>97</sup> **The Gambia**,<sup>98</sup> **Myanmar**,<sup>99</sup> and **Sweden**. Between January 2018 and February 2019, the Chinese embassy in Sweden issued at least 52 statements targeting journalists and news outlets, criticizing their coverage and peppering them with insults or even threats.<sup>99</sup> In response to a critical article on the Chinese economy in March 2019, the Moscow embassy's press secretary emailed a reporter from the liberal Russian newspaper *Nezavisimaya Gazeta* with an unambiguous

warning: “I’ll tell you categorically that you need to delete this article immediately from your newspaper’s website; otherwise you will be blacklisted and you will never be allowed to enter China!”<sup>100</sup>

## 2. Economic “carrots” and “sticks” to encourage self-censorship by media owners

Beijing has long used co-optation of media owners to marginalize critical reporting and commentary in **Hong Kong, Taiwan**, and the Chinese diaspora, but the tactic has increasingly been applied to English-language and other foreign media as well. The affected owners and executives typically enforce self-censorship within their outlets by killing stories, dismissing independent-minded journalists, or ending contracts for critical columnists.<sup>101</sup> In 2013, for example, Bloomberg executives in the **United States** halted reporting on an investigation into a wealthy Chinese businessman’s ties to top officials following backlash from the Chinese government over a story about Xi Jinping’s family wealth. Other foreign news organizations operating in China have also reportedly increased internal vetting of stories that could be politically sensitive, with the result that the articles are withheld, softened, or published with a delay.<sup>102</sup> In an instance of self-censorship through dismissals, two journalists at **Canada’s Global Chinese Press** were fired in 2016 and 2017 after they published content that was deemed displeasing to Beijing.<sup>103</sup>

Chinese state entities or friendly tycoons have achieved leverage over foreign outlets by purchasing full or partial ownership stakes, and the resulting changes in editorial policy can be seen in their subsequent reporting. One of the most prominent cases in recent years was the 2015 acquisition by Jack Ma, a CCP member and founder of the Chinese

e-commerce giant Alibaba,<sup>104</sup> of **Hong Kong’s** English-language *South China Morning Post*.<sup>105</sup> Since the purchase, the paper has tended to publish more articles and editorials that put a positive spin on news related to China’s government or that support its policies in Hong Kong.<sup>106</sup> Several incidents have raised concerns about reduced editorial independence, particularly in the print edition,<sup>107</sup> despite generally balanced online coverage of the 2019 Hong Kong protest movement.

The trend reaches far beyond Hong Kong. Media groups in countries as diverse as **Mongolia, South Africa**, and **Argentina** have established a financial or otherwise cooperative relationship with Chinese state entities and then reportedly shifted toward less discerning and even fawning coverage of Chinese activities.<sup>108</sup> In 2013, two companies with ties to the Chinese government and state media purchased a 20 percent stake in Independent Media, the second-largest media firm in **South Africa**.<sup>109</sup> Five years later, Azad Essa had his weekly column suddenly canceled by the media group after he wrote about the mass detention of Muslims in Xinjiang.<sup>110</sup> Even when overseas media investments are undertaken by private Chinese companies, some coordination with the government likely occurs. Beginning in March 2018, news media became one of several industries listed as “sensitive” for investment abroad, meaning any acquisitions valued at more than \$300 million would require approval from the National Development and Reform Commission.<sup>111</sup>

## 3. Indirect pressure applied via proxies

The CCP is adept at using proxies—including advertisers, satellite firms, technology companies, foreign governments, and international organizations—to prevent or punish the publication of unfavorable content. In recent years, companies have refused to place ads or revoked previous ad purchases with independent-minded Chinese diaspora outlets like **Australia’s Vision China Times**;<sup>112</sup> Apple has removed the mobile applications of the *New York Times* Chinese edition and Quartz from its app stores in China;<sup>113</sup> **Hong Kong** authorities refused to renew a visa for *Financial Times* editor Victor Mallet;<sup>114</sup> and NTD-TV was denied accreditation to cover the UN General Assembly in New York.<sup>115</sup> But these represent only a small sample of the ways in which proxies have attempted to restrict reporting or news distribution on Beijing’s behalf.

One relatively new phenomenon has been the threat of defamation lawsuits against journalists and news outlets for critical reporting about either Chinese government actions

### COUNTRY CASE STUDY



The Chinese embassy in **Sweden** issued at least 52 statements targeting journalists and news outlets, criticizing their coverage and peppering them with insults or even threats.

## COUNTRY CASE STUDY



Two journalists at **Canada's Global Chinese Press** were fired after they published content that was deemed displeasing to Beijing

or pro-Beijing officials and companies outside mainland China. Leung Chun-ying, a former **Hong Kong** chief executive who has publicly denounced companies for advertising with the prodemocracy newspaper *Apple Daily*, has also brought a defamation suit in Hong Kong against a journalist with a different outlet who wrote about Leung's possible links to organized crime. In the **Czech Republic**, lawyers representing the powerful Chinese energy and financial conglomerate CEFC sent letters threatening lawsuits over news articles linking the firm's owner to Chinese military intelligence.<sup>116</sup> In 2018, Chinese Australians with ties to the Chinese government filed defamation suits against two media companies over a high-profile investigative documentary that examined the CCP's political influence in **Australia**.<sup>117</sup>

Foreign governments have taken steps that assist the Chinese authorities in achieving their goals. Research by the International Republican Institute has found that officials in countries with their own restrictions on press freedom often enforce a positive media spin on Chinese engagement, citing cases in **Serbia**, **Zambia**, **Hungary**, the **Maldives**, and **Ecuador** under the administration of former president Rafael Correa.<sup>118</sup> Elsewhere, foreign governments or state media have been more aggressive in penalizing news outlets and journalists for departing from the CCP line. In May 2019, **Nepal**'s state news agency—which has a content-sharing agreement with Xinhua—launched an investigation into three journalists who had circulated a news item about the Dalai Lama, Tibet's exiled spiritual leader.<sup>119</sup> In 2018, police in **Thailand** detained a Taiwanese national who had helped facilitate uncensored broadcasts into China by the US-based Sound of Hope radio network; the outlet was founded by adherents of the Falun Gong spiritual movement, which is persecuted in China, and broadcasts uncensored news, culture, and political debate programs.<sup>120</sup> The Taiwanese man was convicted in 2019 by a Thai court under questionable circumstances, but was permitted to return to Taiwan after

international pressure on his behalf.<sup>121</sup> The case marked the third of its kind in the region; two similar cases involving Sound of Hope had arisen in **Indonesia** and **Vietnam**, with the latter resulting in two men being imprisoned.<sup>122</sup>

### 4. Cyberattacks, physical assaults, and online verbal abuse

Commentators, journalists, and media outlets responsible for critical coverage of the CCP routinely face cyberattacks or physical assaults that serve the party's aims, even if there is not always proof that they were ordered by Beijing. Denial-of-service and phishing attacks often target offshore Chinese media and exile communities,<sup>123</sup> but they have also penetrated the computer systems of major international news outlets in the **United States** like the *Wall Street Journal*.<sup>124</sup> In 2015, the US-based code-sharing site GitHub, which hosts some websites that are blocked in China, was hit with a massive denial-of-service attack that was later traced to Chinese government servers and attributed to a new tool dubbed the Great Cannon.<sup>125</sup> Among the GitHub pages that were apparently targeted in the attack was one featuring a copy of the *New York Times* Chinese-language website.<sup>126</sup>

Journalists and media owners in **Hong Kong** have been attacked by thugs with suspected links to Beijing in recent years, and in mid-2018, threatening letters were sent to the homes of two prominent staffers at the English-language *Hong Kong Free Press*.<sup>127</sup> Throughout the Hong Kong protest movement in 2019, media outlets across the political spectrum faced violence from police, thugs, and occasionally demonstrators.<sup>128</sup> But more targeted, premeditated attacks against critical outlets also occurred, including an assault by thugs on an *Apple Daily* reporter as she was dining in a restaurant,<sup>129</sup> and an arson attack on the printing company that produces the Hong Kong Chinese-language edition of the *Epoch Times* newspaper.<sup>130</sup> Pro-Beijing internet trolls have reportedly become more active among overseas Chinese communities. For example, US-based democracy

**For the party's narrative to be convincing, reporting about the darker sides of CCP rule at home and of Chinese activities abroad must be controlled and suppressed.**

advocate and political commentator Chen Pokong remarked that YouTube videos of his popular political talk show are now frequently targeted with similarly worded comments that accuse him of being a traitor or insult his personal appearance.<sup>131</sup>

### Propaganda and censorship: Two sides of the same coin

It is not by chance that Beijing's multibillion-dollar effort to expand the reach of state-run media has been coupled with increasing efforts to silence critical voices and reporting abroad. For the party's narrative to be convincing to audiences inside and outside China, reporting about the darker sides of CCP rule at home and of Chinese activities abroad must be controlled and suppressed.

Indeed, in several instances, the expansion of Chinese state media in a given setting has coincided with or directly resulted in the displacement of more editorially independent and international sources of information. In many Chinese diaspora communities, free pro-Beijing newspapers have

displaced incumbent papers based in Taiwan and Hong Kong. In 2008, satellite firm Eutelsat of France cut its transmission of NTD-TV to China, apparently in exchange for the opportunity to broadcast Xinhua's English news channel in Europe.<sup>132</sup> More recently, in 2017, Radio Television Hong Kong ended its 24-hour broadcasts of the BBC World Service, replacing it with state-run China National Radio's Hong Kong edition.<sup>133</sup> In Cambodia, the launch of a joint-venture television station and online news outlet—carrying Xinhua and other Chinese state media content in English, Khmer, and Chinese—has coincided with the closure of long-standing, more independent outlets.<sup>134</sup> And when Xi Jinping visited Papua New Guinea in November 2018, local and international journalists were barred from covering his meeting with eight regional leaders and a road-opening ceremony; they were told instead to use reporting by Xinhua or video from CCTV as the basis for their coverage.<sup>135</sup>

As Chinese entities build up control over media dissemination channels and key nodes in the information infrastructure, as described in the next section, the CCP's propaganda and censorship efforts could become even more comprehensive.

## Chapter 4

### Controlling content delivery systems outside China

Over the past decade, Chinese companies have become increasingly active in building information infrastructure and content delivery systems abroad. Although privately owned, Chinese technology giants like Huawei and Tencent retain close ties with the Chinese government and security services, routinely providing censorship and surveillance assistance to the party-state within China.<sup>136</sup> The international expansion of such companies has received the explicit blessing of the CCP. For example, in a 2017 essay in the authoritative party journal *Qiushi* on China's strategy for becoming a "cyber superpower," the authors cited the objective of enhancing "the global influence of internet companies like Alibaba, Tencent, Baidu, [and] Huawei."<sup>137</sup>

As these and other Chinese companies gain more influence

and control over the avenues of content transmission and dissemination, they open the door to a whole new level of influence. CCP-friendly gatekeepers are now positioned to manage information flows in other countries. Analyst Peter Mattis has argued that the CCP's approach over the past decade has been at least as much about controlling the medium as about controlling the message: "This way they can essentially have a monopoly on the information environment.... That makes it easier for their narratives to be received and accepted."<sup>138</sup>

There is already evidence of Chinese companies using their control over dissemination channels to create advantages for Chinese state media or to suppress information deemed undesirable by Beijing. But even where this potential has not

yet been activated, the foundations are being laid to facilitate future manipulation.

Chinese firms are pursuing the CCP's goals on this front in three crucial ways: by leading transitions from analog to digital television broadcasting, by expanding the reach of Chinese social media platforms, and by seizing international market share for Chinese mobile devices.

## **1. Becoming a leading force in digital television around the world**

Chinese companies have become very active in the digital television broadcasting sector. This is especially evident in Africa, where the Chinese television distribution company StarTimes has been a key player in the transition from analog to digital transmission, accruing over 10 million subscribers in 30 countries and gaining the power to determine which stations those viewers are able to access.<sup>139</sup> Although privately owned, StarTimes has benefited from a close relationship with the Chinese government and occasional subsidies.<sup>140</sup> The company also appears to have prioritized CCTV channels in its package offerings at the expense of independent international news stations.<sup>141</sup> In **Kenya**, **Uganda**, and **Nigeria**, for example, packages that include international options like the BBC World Service cost more than basic packages with local channels and Chinese state media, sometimes beyond the reach of what many African families can afford.<sup>142</sup>

With its investments and partnerships, StarTimes has gained a foothold in other portions of the television sector on the continent. In 2013, it became a major shareholder of TopTV, a **South African** provider of satellite television.<sup>143</sup> More recently, in **Zambia**, the firm entered into a joint venture with the local state broadcaster to modernize the country's television transmission system. TopStar, the joint firm, received licenses from the Zambian government for signal distribution and content provision. The deal reportedly violated the country's competition laws, which bar any single entity from gaining too much control over the market. According to research by the International Republican Institute, StarTimes owns 60 percent of the joint venture, meaning the deal "effectively paves the way for a Chinese company to control Zambia's national broadcasting service."<sup>144</sup>

Chinese investment in digital television infrastructure is not limited to Africa. Huawei led the transition from analog to digital television in **Cuba**.<sup>145</sup> In 2017, Chinese tech giant

ZTE signed an agreement with state-owned **Pakistan** Television Corporation (PTV) to expand digital television services, particularly to rural and remote regions. According to a ZTE statement at the time, the agreement "will cover collaboration across R&D of digital terrestrial television technologies, staff training, and content."<sup>146</sup> In **Laos**, after Chinese assistance enabled the state broadcaster to upgrade to digital transmission, in May 2019 the broadcaster signed an agreement with a Chinese media company from Yunnan Province to create joint content in Lao and Chinese, including news and current affairs programs.<sup>147</sup> In **Cambodia**, a joint venture between the national television station and Yunnan Digital TV Company was already transmitting 70 channels in 2017, including CCTV and local Cambodian stations.<sup>148</sup> In June 2019, **Timor-Leste** launched a digital television expansion project that will be managed by two Chinese companies.<sup>149</sup>

In a sign of Beijing's technical clout on the world stage, the International Telecommunication Union has recognized China's Digital Terrestrial Multimedia Broadcast (DTMB) standard, placing it on the same level as standards originating in the United States, Europe, and Japan.<sup>150</sup>

## **Chinese investment in digital television infrastructure is evident throughout Asia, Africa, and Latin America.**

## **2. Expanding global adoption of Chinese social media platforms**

As Chinese social media firms innovate and build on their large domestic market share, some of their applications are slowly gaining worldwide popularity, creating new avenues for the CCP to potentially influence news distribution outside China. One notable example is WeChat, an app that combines instant messaging, group chats, business services, and electronic payments. It is owned by Tencent and boasts a billion active users within China. However, an estimated 100 to 200 million people outside the country also use the service.<sup>151</sup> Among them are millions of members of the Chinese diaspora in countries like **Canada**, **Australia**, and the **United States**. Increasingly, WeChat is being used by politicians in these democracies to communicate with Chinese diaspora constituents.

Chinese social media applications are gaining worldwide popularity, creating new avenues for the CCP to potentially influence news distribution outside China.

WeChat is expanding in much of Asia, attracting non-Chinese speakers in countries like the **Philippines** and **India**.<sup>152</sup>

**Malaysia** is reportedly home to 20 million users,<sup>153</sup> out of a population of 31 million. In **Thailand**, an estimated 17 percent of the population has a WeChat account.<sup>154</sup> WeChat was the second most downloaded application in **Mongolia** in 2017.<sup>155</sup> In **Bhutan** it has gained a following due to its ability to function where reception is patchy, and because its voice-message functionality is attractive to local users.

who are illiterate.<sup>156</sup> Merchants in **Myanmar**'s Shan State along the border with China have taken up the app,<sup>157</sup> and the number of retailers in **Japan** that accept its WePay service (mostly for the convenience of Chinese tourists) increased 35-fold in 2018.<sup>158</sup>

Amid tightening internet censorship within China, reports have emerged of WeChat staff deleting politically sensitive information posted by foreign users or shutting down their accounts. In **Canada**, WeChat censors deleted a member of Parliament's message to constituents praising Hong Kong's Umbrella Movement protesters, manipulated dissemination of news reports related to Huawei executive Meng Wanzhou's arrest, and blocked broader media coverage of Chinese government corruption and leading Chinese officials. In the **United States**, Chinese Americans have reported censorship of WeChat posts in group conversations about local political issues,<sup>159</sup> or had their accounts shut down after commenting about democratic parties' victory in Hong Kong's district council elections in November 2019.<sup>160</sup>



Word cloud made of terms flagged for review from a set of 3.7 billion WeChat messages. Most messages were sent in Chinese within China, but also included 19 million messages sent by users around the world. (Photo Credit: Victor Gevers)

The threat of censorship or other reprisals may be fueling self-censorship by foreign news outlets that use WeChat to share content. In **Australia**, a November 2018 study of news sources available to the Chinese diaspora found negligible political coverage of China on the WeChat channels of Chinese-language news providers.<sup>161</sup> Incredibly, between March and August 2017, none of the WeChat channels published a single article on Chinese politics, despite the run-up to the important 19th Communist Party Congress that fall.

There is evidence that WeChat is systematically monitoring conversations of users outside China and flagging politically sensitive content for some form of scrutiny, even when transmission of the messages is not hindered. In April 2019, researcher Victor Gevers of the GDI Foundation revealed that WeChat was filtering billions of messages for “review” based on keyword triggers, including dialogues involving users located outside China.<sup>162</sup> For example, on March 18 alone, 3.6 billion messages in Chinese, 59 million in English, and 26 million in other languages were captured and routed to operators. Keywords triggering capture of the entire conversation included “Xi Jinping,” “CCP,” “1989,” and “Tibet.” While the majority of the messages were sent in China, some 19 million English-language messages were captured from users around the globe, including people in North America, Europe, South America, Taiwan, and Australia.<sup>163</sup>

Following in WeChat’s footsteps and surpassing it in terms of global audience is TikTok, an app for sharing short videos that was developed by the Chinese company ByteDance.<sup>164</sup> The same firm owns a Chinese counterpart, Douyin, and the news aggregation service Jinri Toutiao, which is popular in China.<sup>165</sup> TikTok emerged as one of the most downloaded applications worldwide in 2019,<sup>166</sup> especially among teenage users. About 60 percent of the app’s monthly active users reportedly reside in the **United States**.<sup>167</sup> As with WeChat, there is evidence that TikTok has censored material considered sensitive by the Chinese government or downplayed political content more broadly.<sup>168</sup> According to internal documents obtained by the *Guardian*, employees of the company have been required to remove content related to such topics as the Tiananmen Square massacre and Falun Gong.<sup>169</sup> Searches for “Hong Kong” on the site over the summer of 2019 returned surprisingly few results related to the ongoing protests in the city compared with other popular social media platforms.<sup>170</sup>

TikTok has denied that it censors content at the Chinese

government’s behest and claims that the guidelines obtained by the *Guardian* were discontinued in May 2019. Tests by users and BuzzFeed journalists in late 2019 found videos supporting the Hong Kong protests, with some garnering more than 100,000 views.<sup>171</sup> This may reflect changes to TikTok’s moderation rules. In November 2019, the German outlet *Netzpolitik* published a leaked excerpt of the app’s new guidelines.<sup>172</sup> It indicated that a wide range of political content and videos about “controversial events,” not only those potentially sensitive to China, may not be deleted, but will instead be downplayed by keeping them off of feeds and recommendation lists.<sup>173</sup> More systematic testing is needed to confirm what restrictions are in fact being enforced.

Although WeChat and TikTok are the most prominent and widely used examples, other apps have joined the global expansion of Chinese-owned social media platforms. In **India**, it was reported in April 2019 that Chinese services made up 44 of the 100 most downloaded apps in Google’s Playstore, although not all were social media services.<sup>174</sup> Authorities and media regulators in **Taiwan** have voiced concerns about Tencent’s plans to bring its video app to the island.<sup>175</sup> Meanwhile, Chinese companies are acquiring stakes in foreign platforms. From 2017 to 2019, Tencent purchased stakes in the US tech firms Reddit, a news aggregator and content-rating platform, and Snap, owner of the popular photo-sharing service Snapchat.<sup>176</sup> The firm also holds a 5 percent stake in the gaming giant Blizzard, which in 2019 took retaliatory action against gamers who spoke out in support of Hong Kong’s prodemocracy protesters.<sup>177</sup>

**Reports have emerged of WeChat staff deleting politically sensitive information posted by foreign users or shutting down their accounts.**

### 3. Gaining worldwide market share for Chinese mobile devices

Another sector in which Chinese companies with close ties to the government have gained a global foothold is the market for mobile devices. As of November 2019, Huawei and Xiaomi were ranked third and fourth worldwide—behind Apple

and Samsung—for the popularity of their devices, with 10 percent and 8 percent of global market share, respectively.<sup>178</sup> In Europe and Africa, Huawei's share of the market is much greater, at 17–18 percent, while Xiaomi is more popular in Asia, where it holds 12 percent of the market. ZTE has also sold tens of millions of smartphones around the world over the past decade.<sup>179</sup>

The public debate about the implications of Chinese involvement in the mobile technology sector has focused on the potential for surveillance and intelligence gathering. There has been less discussion of the risks pertaining to content manipulation and censorship. Smartphone providers have significant influence over the internet browsers and app stores associated with their devices, and within China, both domestic companies and foreign-owned firms like Apple have already been forced to limit access to certain content in this way. Apple has removed various news media apps and tools that enable users to reach blocked websites. In October 2019, the firm was reported to be using a Tencent-generated blacklist on its iPhone browser, restricting websites deemed politically sensitive by the CCP in much the same manner as it would combat malware or phishing content internationally.<sup>180</sup> Xiaomi, Alibaba, and other Chinese tech firms reportedly blocked access to GitHub from their browsers in April 2019, after tech workers used the platform to protest against long hours and exploitative working conditions in their industry.<sup>181</sup>

Many Chinese smartphone makers have relied on Google's Android operating system and Chrome browser, but following US sanctions on certain Chinese tech firms, this may be changing. In August 2019, Huawei unveiled its own mobile operating system, HarmonyOS, although it was not set to be available for international markets until mid-2020.<sup>182</sup> Meanwhile, its newest smartphone, Mate30, launched in October 2019, features the Huawei AppGallery and Huawei Browser.<sup>183</sup> The latter is promoted for download on the company's English-language website, indicating at least some effort to target international users. The browser is described as offering "high-speed surfing, shortcuts, and breaking news"—a reference to a news-feed service it provides.<sup>184</sup> To date, there has been no systematic research or testing of censorship on the browsers of Chinese-made smartphones, so it is difficult to know whether and how many hurdles are being placed in the way of global users. But even if such manipulation has yet to occur, it is imminently feasible for the companies in question.

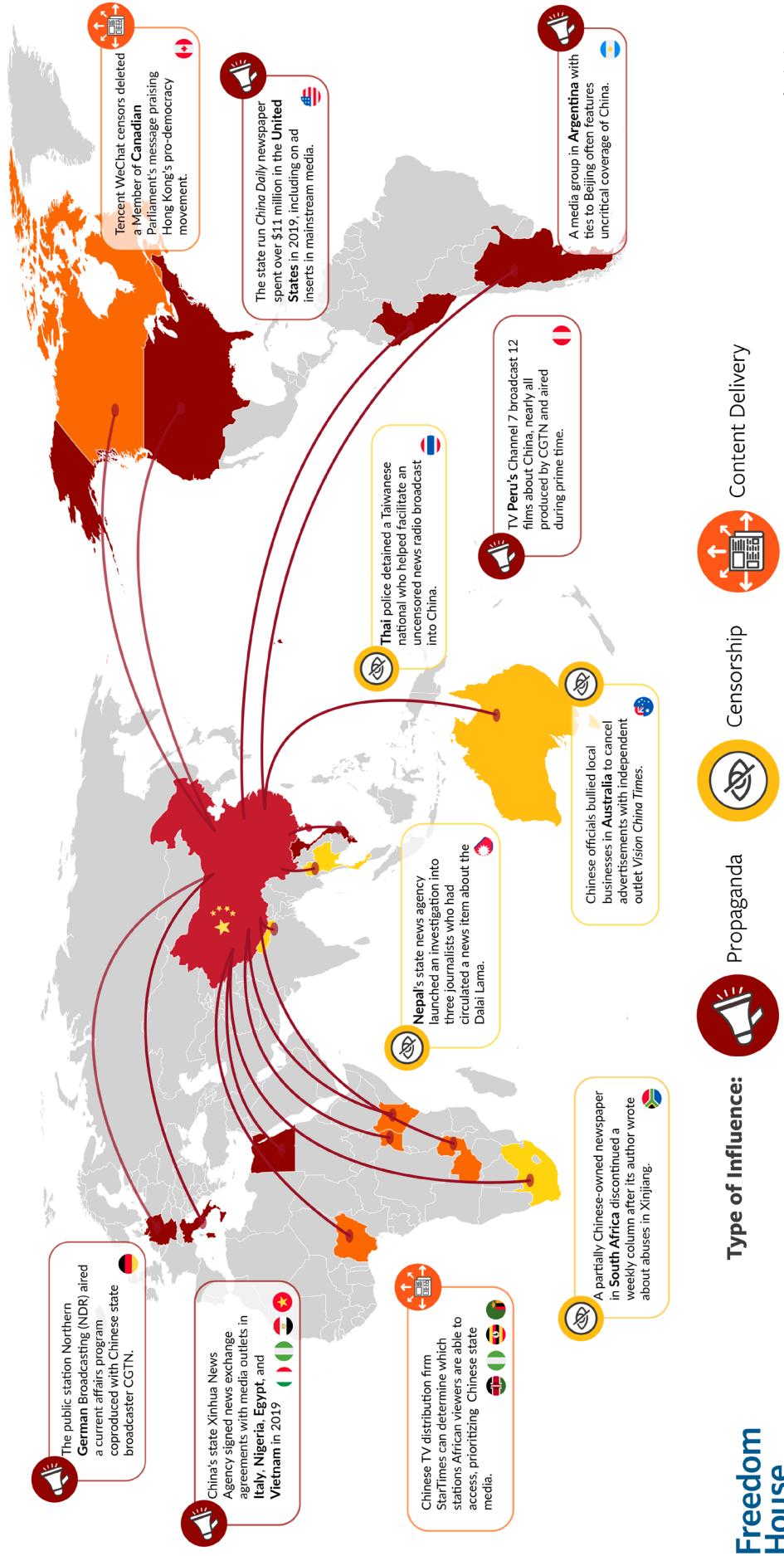
## Chinese control over information infrastructure as a threat to democracy

Chinese companies' growing role in content delivery systems creates opportunities for the CCP to influence not only foreigners' views about China but also the news they receive about their own countries and political leaders, with possible implications for the outcome of elections. Already, Chinese government support for state television broadcasters in countries like **Cambodia** benefits incumbent rulers. The growing use of WeChat by both diaspora communities and non-Chinese speakers in settings ranging from **Malaysia** and **Mongolia** to **Australia** and **Canada** also creates a strong foundation for future CCP election meddling. The app's design has already been criticized for its tendency to deemphasize the source and credibility of information, aiding the spread of misinformation and making the fight against fake news even more difficult than it is on other social media platforms.<sup>185</sup> As Australian professor John Fitzgerald recently noted, "We are entering uncharted territory. WeChat was not designed to work in a democracy."<sup>186</sup>

**The Chinese-owned video-sharing platform TikTok emerged as one of the most downloaded applications worldwide in 2019.**

# Beijing's Global Megaphone:

## Selected Cases of Chinese Media Influence Abroad



## CHAPTER 5

# The impact of Beijing's efforts

As the Chinese party-state devotes billions of dollars a year to its foreign propaganda and censorship efforts, it is important to ask how effective they are in different parts of the world.

The answer to this question is mixed. Some aspects of Beijing's initiatives have been remarkably effective and carry serious political and economic implications. Other elements have been much less successful, at times triggering strategic adjustments.

The CCP's media influence projects have arguably achieved the greatest results with regard to improving China's image in key regions, limiting negative coverage of China's foreign engagement, establishing dominance over Chinese-language media, imposing financial difficulties on disfavored outlets, propagating China's authoritarian model of media control, and undermining international norms and democratic governance.

These CCP tactics fundamentally undermine international norms and democratic principles.

### 1. Improving the image of China and Xi Jinping in key regions

The Chinese government's propaganda and censorship efforts appear to be relatively effective at improving or retaining a positive image for China—and for Xi Jinping personally—in the developing world. Pew Research Center surveys from 2018 and 2019 indicate that public views of China are, for the most part, more positive in the Middle East, Africa, and Southeast Asia than in Europe, North America, Northeast Asia, and Australia.<sup>187</sup> Xi was especially well regarded in **Russia**, the **Philippines**, **Tunisia**, **Nigeria**, and **Kenya** in 2018, and fewer respondents in those countries acknowledged the Chinese government's poor human rights

record.<sup>188</sup> Respondents in many of these locations continued to view Xi positively in 2019, even where overall favorability toward China had declined compared with 2018.<sup>189</sup> While a number of factors could contribute to such results, a 2016 academic study by Catie Snow Bailard rigorously examined the correlation between China's growing media footprint in six African countries—**Ghana**, **Kenya**, **Nigeria**, **Senegal**, **South Africa**, and **Uganda**—and public opinion from 2006 to 2013. The study found that “in many cases, the larger the Chinese media presence in a country and the more access to relevant media technology, the more favorable public opinion toward China has grown across multiple dimensions.”<sup>190</sup>

### 2. Limiting coverage of the downsides to China's economic and political engagement abroad

There is evidence that Beijing has been successful in reducing scrutiny of the risks associated with various countries' economic and political engagement with China. For instance, in his 2017 study of China's use of “sharp power” tactics in Latin America,<sup>191</sup> journalist Juan Pablo Cardenal noted that “very few Argentine experts interviewed by this author mentioned potential risks—for example, economic dependency or weakened democratic principles—that **Argentina** might face in developing a closer relationship with China. Likewise, the author did not observe any significant public debate taking place on these themes in the mainstream local media.” Similarly in **Peru**, there appeared to be little serious media coverage or critical discussion related to environmental and labor controversies that have periodically affected Chinese operations in the country's extractive industries. One investigative journalist in Lima remarked, “Censorship is not obvious but it comes in other forms. Even if a Chinese scandal gets published, it is downplayed in less than 100 words buried inside the newspaper and never reaches the front page.”

### 3. Establishing dominance over Chinese-language media

Chinese state media and pro-Beijing private outlets are more influential today than they were 20 years ago, when many

consumers in the Chinese diaspora got their news from relatively independent papers or broadcasters based in Hong Kong or Taiwan.<sup>192</sup> To take the **United States** as an example, the CCP's ability to influence the media consumed by Chinese Americans is especially evident in the cable television market. Data from 2016 show that CCTV and Hong Kong's pro-Beijing Phoenix TV were available almost everywhere in the country. By contrast, the proindependence Taiwanese station ETTV and the US-based NTD-TV are available in only a fraction of US households.<sup>193</sup> This imbalance does not appear to be accidental, given reports of behind-the-scenes Chinese pressure on providers.<sup>194</sup> CCTV's dominance in the cable market in the United States is especially significant, as television is a leading source of information among Chinese American households.<sup>195</sup>

The global scale of this dominance is remarkable. In October 2019, the Chinese State Council and the CCP United Front Work Department hosted the 10th World Chinese Media Forum, which was attended by over 400 representatives from Chinese-language media outlets in 61 countries,<sup>196</sup> ranging from **Canada**, with 51 media groups, to 16 media groups from eight countries in sub-Saharan Africa.<sup>197</sup> In **Australia**, most Chinese-language publications are pro-Beijing. A 2016 PEN America report found that international news organizations were often more proactive in self-censoring coverage on their Chinese-language websites compared with their English platforms. Chinese editions tended to be more focused on economics, business, and lifestyle stories than on politics, and some potentially sensitive articles appeared only on the English websites.<sup>198</sup> In **New Zealand**, a long-term effort by the CCP to influence Chinese-language media coverage

and local communities has had a profound impact on local politics. According to one Chinese scholar commenting on the country's 2017 elections, "the Chinese community can only realistically aspire to political representation by its own members through individuals approved by Beijing."<sup>199</sup>

#### 4. Imposing financial difficulties on disfavored outlets

By the evening of October 25, 2012, after China blocked the *New York Times'* English and Chinese-language websites in retribution for a story about then premier Wen Jiabao's family wealth,<sup>200</sup> the media company's stock had fallen by 20 percent in 24 hours.<sup>201</sup> Over the following months it returned to its previous levels, but the example highlights how censorship in China can damage the financial viability of a major international outlet. Since that year, the repeated obstructions the *Times* has faced regarding its Chinese-language content—including Apple's recent removal of its app from online stores accessible in China—have likely had other economic ramifications, including for advertising revenue.

Distorted competition for advertising is evident among Chinese diaspora media as well. The lopsided access to US cable distribution described above certainly makes CCTV or Phoenix TV more attractive outlets for advertisers attempting to reach the Chinese American consumer market, putting competitors that are more critical of the CCP at a disadvantage. More broadly, many businesses are reluctant to advertise with outlets that take a critical stance toward the Chinese government, and are more inclined to advertise in strongly pro-Beijing papers, due to either direct or indirect pressure from Chinese consular officials.<sup>202</sup>

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India, Yunnan growing ever closer

To our readers

Dear friends,

It is our honor to present to you the launch issue of *China Yunnan* news pages.

Committed to helping the Indian know more about China (Yunnan) and China's integration with the international community, *China Yunnan* is an important source of information on Chinese (Yunnanese) politics, economy, society and culture.

In the initial issue, you will find in four pages how close India and Yunnan are, what Yunnan did to connect India to China, and what we can expect for the bilateral cooperation.

We thank you for your interest and support. We will meet you here every Wednesday.

Editorial Team

The front page of the first issue of the Indian edition of *China Yunnan* from October 2016.

The world is beginning to awaken to the threat posed by Beijing's information campaigns and technological expansion.

## 5. Propagating China's authoritarian model of media control

China's aid and investment in the media sector has tended to favor state-owned outlets over independent, private competitors, nudging local information landscapes toward a Chinese model in which progovernment voices dominate and dissent is effectively suppressed. For example, Chinese government assistance and loans in recent years have helped improve the capacity of **Zimbabwe**'s state broadcaster, the digitization of Kaduna State Media Corporation in northern **Nigeria**, the radio broadcasting of **Liberia**'s official station,<sup>203</sup> and the production quality of state-run television in **Laos**.<sup>204</sup>

Meanwhile, trainings for journalists, editors, and media officials from various parts of the world do not merely co-opt foreign content producers and entice them to report positively about China and the CCP. They also serve as an avenue for the Chinese government to promote an alternative approach to journalism and news management that is not based on traditional democratic principles regarding press freedom. Media officials and prominent journalists from the **Philippines** visited China for two weeks in May 2018 to learn about "new media development" and "socialist journalism with Chinese characteristics."<sup>205</sup> But that was far from the only trip of its kind. Research for Freedom House's *Freedom on the Net* 2018 report found that Chinese officials had held trainings and seminars on new media or information management with representatives from 36 out of the 65 countries under study. A 2019 report by the Open Technology Fund indicated that some 75 countries had sent officials or reporters to China for trainings related to media, journalism, or information control over the past five years.<sup>206</sup>

## 6. Undermining international norms and democratic governance

The practices that Chinese officials, state outlets, and other actors employ to exercise influence over media around the world threaten press freedom and freedom of expression,

creating obstacles for journalists and reducing the ability of ordinary people to post, share, and access uncensored and unbiased information. But the tactics outlined in this report also fundamentally undermine international norms and democratic principles more broadly, such as representative government, the rule of law, and fair business competition. When Chinese diplomats intimidate local journalists, advertisers, and editors, they overstep long-standing rules on diplomatic behavior. When Chinese officials pressure other governments to take legal action against critical media outlets, they damage efforts to build up freedom of speech and the rule of law in those locations. And when companies like StarTimes obtain contracts and pursue monopolies in Africa by exploiting weak rules on transparency and competition, they harm long-term campaigns to combat corruption and conflicts of interest.

Chinese state media and suspected CCP-affiliated actors have even taken steps to influence democratic elections, and not just in Taiwan. Shortly before midterm elections in the **United States**, for example, a September 2018 print edition of the *Des Moines Register* included a four-page China Watch supplement,<sup>207</sup> paid for by the state-owned *China Daily*, with content that was more overtly politicized than is typical for such features. Two of the front-page articles described how President Donald Trump's budding trade war with China would harm American soybean farmers and promoted a new book that fondly recalled the time Xi had spent in Iowa as a young man. In July 2018, CGTN released a two-minute animated video about the impact of trade tensions on the soybean industry, concluding with the question, "Will voters there turn out to support Trump and the Republicans once they get hit in the pocketbooks?"<sup>208</sup>

## Beijing's successes raise alarms

The speed with which China's authoritarian regime has increased its influence over media production and dissemination channels in other countries has allowed it to gain considerable ground without attracting unwelcome attention. However, the world is beginning to awaken to the threat posed to democratic norms and institutions by Beijing's information campaigns and technological expansion. In a sign that further CCP successes may be more difficult to achieve, Chinese media influence efforts have faced increasing resistance from news outlets, governments, technology firms, and civil society, as explored in the next section.

## CHAPTER 6

# Growing pushback against Beijing's global media influence

In spite of the gains that the CCP and its proxies have made in recent years, there are clearly some limits to Beijing's influence, as various factors—from journalistic integrity to public skepticism about state-run media—serve as countervailing forces. Moreover, over the past three years, the pushback against CCP media influence outside China has intensified. Resistance in various forms has come from the media industry, policymakers, the technology sector, and civil society.

### 1. The media sphere

News outlets around the world continue to publish information that the CCP would likely prefer to be hidden. Foreign correspondents and their interviewees in China take great risks to expose unsavory facets of party rule and important changes in Chinese society, and some media executives boldly reject Chinese pressure despite the risk of reprisals. In a particularly potent demonstration of this resistance, the Chinese government's increased persecution of Muslims in Xinjiang has made international headlines over the past three years despite official denials, misleading propaganda, and restrictions on foreign media access to the heavily policed region.<sup>209</sup> In addition to major outlets from the United States and Europe, networks like **Qatar**'s Al-Jazeera and local media in Muslim-majority countries like **Pakistan** and **Morocco** have published articles that are critical of the crackdown.<sup>210</sup> Such reporting may have contributed to relatively sharp declines of 7 to 17 percent in China's public approval ratings between 2018 and 2019 in influential developing countries with notable Muslim populations, including **Indonesia**, **Kenya**, and **Tunisia**.<sup>211</sup>

Professional journalists and informed audiences in countries with relatively free media are not particularly attracted to or convinced by Chinese government propaganda, particularly when its official origins are known. In **Peru**, Xinhua failed to market its services to the country's main privately owned outlets, reportedly because they felt uneasy accepting content, even free of charge, from a foreign state-run news agency.<sup>212</sup> Surveys of South African journalists have found

that many are reluctant to rely on Chinese media because they view it with mistrust due to state control.<sup>213</sup> A study of university students in **Kenya** and **South Africa** published in 2018 found relatively low levels of usage and high levels of skepticism related to Chinese media.<sup>214</sup> And the viewership statistics for CGTN America's presence on YouTube pale in comparison with major television networks in the **United States**.

Meanwhile, the low costs and open nature of online publishing have enabled independent and critical alternatives to pro-Beijing news outlets to disseminate their content within China and abroad. Even after the *New York Times* Chinese-language website was blocked in China and its app was removed from Apple stores there, it has continued to distribute its Android application via GitHub, and its website was ranked 231st in the country in late 2018.<sup>215</sup> In **Hong Kong** and **Taiwan**, English and Chinese-language digital media start-ups—like *Initium*, *InMedia*, *Hong Kong Free Press*, *Storm Media*, and *New Talk*—have become increasingly influential, providing a counterbalance to self-censorship among traditional media. Many such outlets are nonprofits or were founded by prominent print and television journalists who were concerned about encroaching China-related self-censorship; this background makes them less vulnerable to ownership changes that could curtail their editorial independence, though their experiments with funding models have had mixed results.

Another collection of nonprofit media outlets that have been growing in influence were founded by Chinese Americans who practice Falun Gong, the spiritual discipline whose adherents have been fiercely persecuted in China since 1999. Over the past decade, some of these outlets have professionalized and expanded their Chinese-language programming, which appears to have borne fruit in terms of listeners and viewers. One of the most popular Chinese-language radio stations in the San Francisco Bay Area is Sound of Hope, owned by local Falun Gong practitioners and known for broadcasting news about human rights abuses in

China, hosting political talk shows that are critical of the CCP, and informing new immigrants about American democratic values.<sup>216</sup> Similarly, website rankings from Alexa show that NTDTV's Chinese-language website significantly outperforms CCTV in both the United States (ranked 1,608 and 40,905, respectively, in November 2018) and Hong Kong (ranked 95 and 1,175, respectively, in December 2019).<sup>217</sup>

Several of the above-mentioned outlets have benefited from the structure of online advertising, in which ad revenue is distributed automatically by intermediaries based on objective criteria like page views or clicks.<sup>218</sup> This arrangement is more immune to CCP tactics than traditional media advertising models, where explicit or implicit pressure from Beijing on individual businesses or advertising agencies has affected the income of outlets that are critical of the Chinese government.<sup>219</sup> However, the system can also encourage poor media practices by rewarding the production of sensational content that is especially likely to garner user attention and engagement.<sup>220</sup>

## 2. The policy sphere

In the policy sphere, the past three years have brought a wave of increased awareness regarding CCP foreign influence operations and the political risks of allowing such activities to go unchecked. This awareness has translated into mobilization by governments and outside experts to more critically examine Beijing's media engagement and investment practices, particularly in the context of growing skepticism toward Chinese infrastructure aid through the BRI.

In several countries, government agencies have enhanced their scrutiny of media purchases, investments, and infrastructure projects by companies or individuals with close ties to the Chinese state. In **Taiwan**, regulators have reviewed proposed sales of major media holdings or cable infrastructure to Beijing-friendly tycoons. The National Communications Commission has rejected mergers or sales not just because of concerns about Beijing's influence, but also due to conflicts of interest that could contribute to other forms of self-censorship or anticompetitive behavior.<sup>221</sup> Policymakers in the **United States** have weighed expanding the mandate of the Committee on Foreign Investment in the United States (CFIUS) to include media investments. An August 2018 legal amendment increased oversight of investments in critical technology and infrastructure.<sup>222</sup> In late 2019, CFIUS initiated a national security review of ByteDance's \$1 billion acquisition of Musical.ly in 2017. In late 2018, the Federal Communications Commission began reviewing the

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potential purchase of a Mexican radio station located near the border with southern California by a buyer with reported links to Phoenix TV.<sup>223</sup>

Policymakers and influential commentators in **Israel** and Europe have reportedly discussed the establishment of a review mechanism modeled on CFIUS for Chinese investment in critical sectors, including the media and telecommunications infrastructure.<sup>224</sup> In **Australia**, a new set of foreign influence transparency laws came into effect in March 2019, with one rule requiring the registration of individuals acting on behalf of a "foreign principal" when engaging in "communications activity" for the purpose of political or government influence.<sup>225</sup> Similarly, a parliamentary committee on foreign interference in **New Zealand** recommended actions like prohibiting foreign governments or state entities from owning or investing in local media organizations and requiring a majority of media organization board members to live in New Zealand.<sup>226</sup>

There have also been more concerted efforts to enforce existing laws and broadcast regulations. Over the past two years, the **United Kingdom's** media regulator has launched eight investigations into whether CGTN violated broadcasting rules by participating in the recording and airing of forced confessions by detainees, including activists and journalists, and through its biased coverage of protests in Hong Kong.<sup>227</sup> In October 2018, the US Department of Justice urged Xinhua and CGTN to register as foreign agents under FARA, which CGTN had done as of February 2019.<sup>228</sup> Registration does not necessarily restrict outlets from disseminating content in the **United States**, but the reporting requirements increase transparency surrounding their activities. For example, data from FARA submissions show that *China Daily*'s distribution company, which has long been registered, spent over \$15 million in 2017 and 2018 to influence US policy and public opinion. Like CFIUS, FARA has been held up as a potential model for other countries.<sup>229</sup>

### 3. The tech sector

International social media companies have taken their own steps to increase transparency surrounding overseas Chinese government propaganda and to reduce the spread of disinformation. Google has begun labeling government-funded content on YouTube. CGTN videos are now accompanied by a note stating that the station “is funded in whole or in part by the Chinese government.”<sup>230</sup> Facebook is reportedly considering how to adopt a similar approach, although its implementation has been delayed.<sup>231</sup> In August 2019, Twitter announced a new policy of barring state-run news outlets—including those from China—from using paid advertising to reach a wider audience.<sup>232</sup> Twitter, Facebook, and YouTube have devoted resources to identifying and removing fraudulent networks of paid trolls and automated “bot” accounts that spread disinformation, including those linked to China. In advance of Taiwan’s January 2020 presidential and legislative elections, Facebook intensified its attention to the threat posed by disinformation originating in China and related violations of its community rules, reportedly forming special teams to combat the problem.<sup>233</sup>

It should be noted that the platforms’ policies have at times been flawed and even counterproductive. They have faced criticism for steps that appear to undermine criticism of the Chinese government, highlighting the complexity of the challenge and the importance of open communication with users. Days before the 30th anniversary of the Tiananmen Square massacre, Twitter suspended the accounts of at least 100 Chinese political commentators, including several prominent analysts with large followings. Twitter apologized and claimed that it was an ill-timed “routine action,” then reinstated many of the accounts, but the move created an uproar at the time, and many users remained unsatisfied with the company’s explanation.<sup>234</sup> Similarly, *Hong Kong Free Press* and the satirical news show *China Uncensored*<sup>235</sup> have reportedly had many of their videos about protests in Hong Kong—including items that displayed no violence—mysteriously demonetized by YouTube. The cause appears to be YouTube’s opaque, algorithm-based demonetization system rather than political bias, but the impact still hampers their dissemination and threatens the financial sustainability of content creators who offer on-the-ground reporting to counter Beijing’s narrative.<sup>236</sup>

### 4. The civil society sector

Given the often subtle and stealthy nature of the CCP’s overseas influence operations, rigorous investigations by

scholars and civil society researchers have been useful in unveiling the campaigns, countering false CCP narratives, and providing insight for policymakers.<sup>237</sup> Examples from the past two years include research by Victor Gevers and Toronto’s Citizen Lab that described the scale and nature of WeChat censorship and monitoring outside China,<sup>238</sup> ASPI’s analysis of disinformation tactics based on data Twitter published from a dismantled network, and a detailed account by veteran Sinologist Martin Hala about how a CCP-aligned energy and finance conglomerate engaged in elite capture, media intimidation, and news outlet acquisition in the **Czech Republic**.<sup>239</sup>

In other instances, civil society groups have mobilized to raise awareness of the threat and provoke government actions. There have been multiple rounds of protests in **Taiwan** over increasing Chinese influence on the media, with some prompting regulatory reviews. Multiple fact-checking initiatives have been launched, in some cases partnering with tech firms like LINE, a Japanese-owned messaging app that is popular in Taiwan, to allow users to check the accuracy of particular information within their message feeds.<sup>240</sup> In September 2018, the Ghanaian Independent Broadcasters Association raised concerns about a potential \$95 million contract with StarTimes to build the **Ghana**’s digital television infrastructure, urging the government to use local firms instead, lest the country “virtually submit” its broadcast sector to Chinese control and content.<sup>241</sup>

### The potential for more direct legal and political pushback

Resistance to Beijing’s influence efforts have sometimes taken the form of direct rejection of Chinese officials’ demands or legal filings in democratic court systems with the aim of upholding freedom of expression. In September 2018, **Namibia**’s president rebuffed the Chinese ambassador’s suggested pro-Beijing edits to his speech at a China-Africa forum, asserting that he had his own speechwriters and was “not a puppet.”<sup>242</sup> In **Canada**, one of the journalists dismissed from the *Global Chinese Press* for actions that might upset Beijing filed a complaint with the British Columbia Human Rights Commission.<sup>243</sup> Radio Era Baru in **Indonesia** gained some support from the country’s courts in 2012 when it challenged government efforts to shutter it under pressure from the Chinese embassy.<sup>244</sup> Nevertheless, governments have yet to take more aggressive action to deter Chinese abuses, for instance by penalizing Chinese diplomats who harass or intimidate journalists, advertisers, or media executives.

## CHAPTER 7

# Conclusion

The Chinese party-state, particularly under the leadership of Xi Jinping, is engaged in a massive campaign to influence media outlets and news consumers around the world. While some aspects of this effort are in line with traditional public diplomacy, many others are covert, coercive, and potentially corrupt. There are limits to the campaign's effectiveness at present, but the strategies being pursued have long-term implications, particularly as the CCP and its international affiliates gain greater influence over key portions of the information infrastructure in developing countries. The potential future impact of Beijing's practices should not be underestimated.

The CCP and its proxies have demonstrated no qualms in deploying economic leverage to neutralize and suppress critical reporting—not only on events within China, but also on China's engagement abroad. There have been some early signs that Beijing is willing to use propaganda and disinformation to influence voters in democracies. Meanwhile, many of the same tactics are being applied in sectors beyond the scope of this report, like education, the arts, literature, and the entertainment industry.

Governments and civil society actors in a growing number of countries are exploring avenues for protecting media freedom, now and in the future, from the harmful influence of the CCP. Their efforts to identify policies and legislation to increase transparency and restrict cross-ownership,

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punish coercive and corrupt actions by Chinese officials, and insulate independent media from threats to their financial sustainability will not only address Beijing's encroachments, but also strengthen democratic institutions and independent media against other domestic and international threats. Such action may require considerable political will, as certain measures designed to uphold media freedom and fair competition in the long term will be opposed by Beijing and could hinder Chinese investment in the short term. But it is increasingly clear that allowing the authoritarian dimensions of CCP media influence campaigns to expand unchecked carries its own costs.

## Endnotes

To view the full list of report endnotes, please visit:

<https://freedomhouse.org/report/special-reports/beijings-global-megaphone-china-communist-party-media-influence-abroad>

# Recommendations

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The following recommendations for policymakers in democratic nations could help counter the negative impact of Beijing's foreign media influence campaigns:

- **Increase transparency.** Governments should adopt or enforce policies that enhance publicly available information about Chinese media influence activities in their countries. These could include reporting requirements for media outlets' spending on paid advertorials, ownership structures, and other economic ties to Chinese state actors. In the United States, the Department of Justice should expand recent requests for information of this kind from CGTN and Xinhua to other state or state-affiliated media outlets, especially the Chinese-language CCTV.
- **Impose penalties for transgressions by Chinese officials.** When Chinese diplomats and security agents overstep their bounds and attempt to interfere with media reporting in other countries, the host government should vigorously protest, warning that such behavior may violate diplomatic protocols. If the act in question is repeated or particularly egregious, the host government should consider declaring the offenders persona non grata.
- **Scrutinize international censorship and surveillance by Chinese-owned companies.** Parliaments in democracies should hold hearings to better understand the scope, nature, and impact of politicized censorship and surveillance on Tencent's WeChat platform, ByteDance's TikTok, and Chinese-made mobile phone browsers, then explore avenues for pressuring the company in question to uphold users' rights to free expression and privacy. Politicians who choose to use WeChat, TikTok, or other Chinese-owned platforms to communicate with constituents should monitor messaging closely to detect any manipulation, register their accounts with international phone numbers when possible, and republish messages on parallel international social media platforms.
- **Tighten and enforce broadcasting regulations.** Media regulators should revise or better enforce their broadcasting rules to curb abusive practices by Chinese state media and related companies, such as the airing of forced confessions by prisoners of conscience or the manipulation of media distribution infrastructure in which the companies have acquired an ownership stake.

Regulatory agencies should conduct investigations into potential violations and impose conditions on purchases and mergers to address conflicts of interest.

- **Support independent Chinese-language media.** Media development funders should ensure that exile and diaspora outlets are included in projects that offer funding, training, and other assistance opportunities to Chinese-language media. Governments should proactively engage with such outlets, providing interviews and exploring other potential partnerships, while resisting pressure from Chinese diplomats to marginalize them. Funders should provide technical and financial support to strengthen cybersecurity among independent Chineselanguage outlets.
- **Discuss responses with democratic counterparts.** Diplomats, media regulators, lawmakers, and others should regularly discuss China's foreign media influence tactics and best-practice responses as part of the agenda at bilateral and multilateral meetings among democratic governments. A growing number of governments and other actors are engaging in initiatives to mitigate the problem, and these are likely to yield new lessons and more effective tools. Organized sharing of the resulting knowledge will magnify its impact and encourage the adoption of practices that are both fit to purpose and consistent with democratic values.



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