Seek Truth From Facts (实事求是)

How foreign disinformation emerges from domestic propaganda

The case of China, 2010-2020

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Figure 1: Daryl Morey's original (now deleted) tweet in support of Hong Kong protest¹

On October 4th, Daryl Morey, General Manager of the Houston Rockets basketball team, tweeted an image in support of the Hong Kong protestors. Within twelve hours he would receive over 16,000 comments on Twitter, most of them aggressively condemning him and the protestor “thugs” in Hong Kong.² Daryl quickly deleted his tweet and backtracked on his statement but the damage was done. By October 6th Nike stores in China had pulled their Rockets gear, Chinese sponsors had been lost, and Rockets games were pulled from Chinese television and streaming channels.³ The NBA quickly responded with a now infamous statement saying, “We recognize that the views expressed by Houston Rockets general manager Daryl Morey have deeply offended many of our friends and fans in China, which is regrettable.” Five

¹ “Daryl Morey (@dmorey) / Twitter,” Twitter, accessed April 25, 2020, <https://twitter.com/dmorey>.

² Ben Cohen, Georgia Wells, Tom McGinty, “How One Tweet Turned Pro-China Trolls Against the NBA,” *Wall Street Journal*, October 16, 2019, sec. Life, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/how-one-tweet-turned-pro-china-trolls-against-the-nba-11571238943>.

³ Associated Press, “NBA Scrambles after China Angered by Houston Rockets’ ‘regrettable’ pro-Democracy Tweet,” *The Guardian*, October 7, 2019, sec. Sport, <https://www.theguardian.com/sport/2019/oct/07/nba-scrambles-after-china-angered-by-houston-rockets-regrettable-pro-democracy-tweet>.

months later, Rockets' games were still not being shown in China, and the league had lost hundreds of millions of dollars. In addition to financial costs, the NBA has come under fire for its lukewarm defense of Morey, and its apparent willingness to prioritize Chinese dollars over the rights of peaceful protestors against a ruthless authoritarian regime.

While the impacts of this story are real, the original controversy was not, or at least, was greatly exaggerated. It turns out that much of the immediate backlash to the original tweet was part of a coordinated disinformation campaign by actors likely tied to the Chinese Communist Party (CCP).⁴ In a subsequent analysis of more than 170,000 tweets, researchers at Clemson University determined, "The objective in this troll attack was likely to manipulate the conversation about the Hong Kong protests."⁵ The NBA is not the first organization to acquiesce to the demands of the Chinese government, but the case is noteworthy for showcasing the degree to which social media could be quickly weaponized to manipulate such a powerful institution.

It wasn't necessarily that the NBA was easily manipulated because it was unaware of social media manipulation tactics. After the well-publicized Russian meddling in the 2016 election, corporations are aware of, and prioritizing safeguards against such tactics.⁶ It's possible they were manipulated precisely because the CCP-backed effort was quite different than techniques

⁴ "State-Led Content Manipulation Drove the Backlash against the NBA in China | Freedom House," accessed March 3, 2020, <https://www.freedomhouse.org/article/state-led-content-manipulation-drove-backlash-against-nba-china>.

⁵ McGinty, "How One Tweet Turned Pro-China Trolls Against the NBA."

⁶ Hannah Kuchler, "Companies Scramble to Combat 'Fake News,'" August 22, 2017, <https://www.ft.com/content/afe1f902-82b6-11e7-94e2-c5b903247afd>.

used by other well-known threat actors. State backed influence operations are not all alike, they have different goals, techniques, and levels of sophistication. The Chinese effort was not meant to cause confusion or inflame existing cleavages. Instead, it had a single clear narrative that was perfectly coordinated with other government maneuvers in this period. It was not intended to destroy the NBA, only to nudge the league into self-censorship and compliance going forward. It was not meant as a sustained attack against a vulnerable public figure. Six days after the initial tweet, the CCP issued a directive for all media to, *“Remove all reports related to the NBA from the dual homepages [site-wide and news] (including [social media] clients), and move articles to the backend of the site. Cool down and do not hype related topics. During this sensitive period, do not mislead public opinion.”*⁷ This operation, while diverting from the typical “Russian” disinformation model, was successful in provoking the desired response from the NBA. The NBA is not unique in its inability to protect itself against information operations, and this single case is not particularly worrying. However, it does illuminate a far more concerning problem:

In the face of rising foreign disinformation efforts around the world, there is a lack of robust framework from which to understand and prevent such efforts. The current one-size-fits-all retroactive analysis can neither identify nor thwart a diverse and ever-evolving array of foreign disinformation campaigns.

⁷ Sophie Beach | Oct 10 and 2019, “Minitrue: Remove All Reports Related to the NBA from Homepages | China Digital Times (CDT),” accessed March 3, 2020, <https://chinadigitaltimes.net/2019/10/minitrue-remove-all-reports-related-to-the-nba-from-homepages/>.

GLOBAL DISINFORMATION CONTEXT

Before understanding the issues with the current disinformation framework, it is necessary to properly define terms before continuing. This space is messy, nuanced, and new enough that terminology is not yet agreed upon, or used in a consistent manner.

I will use the following:

Disinformation: Deliberately false information meant to influence policies or opinions.

Propaganda: Deliberately biased or misleading information to promote a political cause or point of view.

Misinformation: False or inaccurate information with no discernible intent or objective.

While propaganda and disinformation are not identical, for the purposes of this paper they will be used interchangeably. The focus is on state-backed, foreign, disinformation campaigns on social media. That is when a state-backed actor engages in the coordinated and covert dissemination of falsehoods on social media against another state, or multiple states, or other entity [like the NBA]. While these campaigns are carried out on social media or online platforms, they are often complemented by traditional media platforms and additional offline means.

The number of states running these domestic information operations has increased from 28 in 2017 to at least 70 in 2019 and is expected to continue to rise.⁸ The majority of these states are using both bots and actual humans to manipulate information. As of 2019, 70% of authoritarian states are using the internet to manipulate the online environment domestically.⁹ In authoritarian regimes, information operations are focused on the suppression of human rights, discrediting political opponents, and drowning out critical opinions.¹⁰

Most of this work is aimed at states' domestic populations, but an increasing number of states are engaging in foreign disinformation campaigns against adversaries (and occasionally allies). Social media platforms have removed accounts and content promoting foreign disinformation campaigns from actors associated with the governments of China, India, Iran, Pakistan, Russia, Myanmar, Saudi Arabia, Venezuela, Egypt and others.¹¹ As of March 2020, these known states all have medium to high cyber troop capacity as defined by the University of Oxford's Computational Propaganda Research Project.¹² Going forward, it is assumed that states with significant domestic cyber capacity are highly likely to engage in foreign disinformation operations. These include Syria, Bahrain, Cambodia, the United Kingdom, and others, many of

⁸ "The Global Disinformation Order: 2019 Global Inventory of Organised Social Media Manipulation – The Computational Propaganda Project," accessed December 9, 2019, <https://comprop.oii.ox.ac.uk/research/cybertroops2019/>.

⁹ "Democracy Reports | V-Dem," accessed March 5, 2020, <https://www.v-dem.net/en/news-publications/democracy-reports/>.

¹⁰ "The Global Disinformation Order: 2019 Global Inventory of Organised Social Media Manipulation – The Computational Propaganda Project."

¹¹ "Facebook Purges Hundreds of Fake Accounts from State Actors, Marketers," *Naked Security* (blog), March 4, 2020, <https://nakedsecurity.sophos.com/2020/03/04/facebook-purges-hundreds-of-fake-accounts-tied-to-state-actors-marketers/>.

¹² "The Global Disinformation Order: 2019 Global Inventory of Organised Social Media Manipulation – The Computational Propaganda Project."

which have permanent cyber troop operations. The emergence of the COVID-19 virus has also created an environment extremely conducive to disinformation, expanding the likelihood that states will engage in some foreign efforts.

SUMMARY

In this paper I argue that while the goals of state-backed foreign disinformation efforts mirror the policy goals of that state, the actual tactics, techniques, and procedures (TTPs) used evolve out of their domestic disinformation apparatus. I will use the history and evolution of Chinese Communist Party (CCP) foreign disinformation efforts to make this argument.

I will first summarize an unmistakable flaw in how disinformation is understood today. Next, I will summarize the historical origins of modern Chinese information control, and demonstrate how they inform the tactics, techniques, and procedures utilized by the modern domestic apparatus. Third, I will summarize the policy interests driving the CCP's foreign disinformation efforts. Fourth, I will use three sequential CCP Campaigns - one involving the Tibetan and Uighur peoples in 2013, one involving the 2018 election in Taiwan, and one involving the ongoing protests in Hong Kong - as case studies to show how early efforts closely mirrored domestic operations, while later efforts evolved distinct characteristics specifically for external consumption. Finally, I will conclude by summarizing the implications of this approach and how it can be useful in future efforts to fight the spread of disinformation, particularly in regards to the immense increase in disinformation volume associated with the spread Covid-19.

THE CURRENT MODEL

In a recent memo, Ellen Weintraub, Chairwoman of the US Federal Election Commission wrote about foreign disinformation efforts against the United States, *“If you aren’t terrified, you aren’t paying attention. The question is what, if anything, we can do about it.”*¹³ As the number of states turning towards foreign information operations increases, the current model of defense will not be able to effectively mitigate the negative impacts. Efforts to combat disinformation are improving as technology platforms have invested massive sums of cash in order to fight what they see as an existential threat to their own survival; however, these efforts are seen as unable to effectively contain the threat.¹⁴ While there is some regulatory progress being made in various countries, the efforts thus far have been uneven and narrow.^{15 16}

The lack of comprehensive global cooperation on this issue leaves us with a status quo which is not ideal. The current methods for combating disinformation are inherently reactive.

Researchers, social media platforms, data analysis firms, intelligence agencies and others must discover anomalies or suspicious activity. They investigate it, and report back to social platforms who then determine whether the activity or associated accounts violates their own

¹³ “Experts Warn of Foreign Disinformation Again in 2020 Election to ‘Annihilate Truth’ - News - The Columbus Dispatch - Columbus, OH,” accessed March 23, 2020, <https://www.dispatch.com/news/20200117/experts-warn-of-foreign-disinformation-again-in-2020-election-to-ldquoannihilate-truthrdquo>.

¹⁴ “Critics Fear Facebook Fact-Checkers Losing Misinformation Fight | TheHill,” accessed March 23, 2020, <https://thehill.com/policy/technology/478896-critics-fear-facebook-fact-checkers-losing-misinformation-fight>.

¹⁵ Welance com-a Freelancers Collective, “Germany’s Half-Baked Approach to Fighting Disinformation,” accessed March 23, 2020, <https://www.gppi.net/2018/04/12/germany-wants-to-fight-disinformation-but-its-approach-is-half-baked>.

¹⁶ Shibani Mahtani, “Singapore Introduced Tough Laws against Fake News. Coronavirus Has Put Them to the Test.,” Washington Post, accessed March 23, 2020, https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/asia_pacific/exploiting-fake-news-laws-singapore-targets-tech-firms-over-coronavirus-falsehoods/2020/03/16/a49d6aa0-5f8f-11ea-ac50-18701e14e06d_story.html.

policies or not. This “whack-a-mole” model is not exhaustive, and is often too slow to mitigate negative effects. The NBA case shows that within twelve hours, the campaign was already a success, and by the time the social platforms were aware of the manipulation, the damage had already been done. The reactive model means that even when they are caught, bad actors are able to quickly reanimate in another form.

The emergence of Chinese Communist Party foreign social media operations provides a unique opportunity for analysis because Chinese citizens are blocked from using popular social media platforms used in much of the rest of the world. This creates a clear demarcation between disinformation intended to be spread domestically and disinformation intended to be spread abroad. Comparing both sides of this divide illuminates the relationship between them. Other countries often run both domestic and foreign influence operations either simultaneously, or on the same platform, meaning comparative analysis is reliant on less reliable indicators such as language, tone, and timing. This is not the case in China where we can analyze the domestic propaganda model as a distinct entity without potential confounding factors.

ORIGINS OF CHINESE INFORMATION CONTROL

CCP domestic information campaigns tend to be effective tools for narrative control in terms of both content and context. In China, the domestic disinformation apparatus is deeply embedded in the governance structure of the state and accepted as the legitimate source of information.

After the Communist Revolution, Chairman Mao Zedong mandated that literature should only exist in China to propagate communist ideas.¹⁷ Mao suppressed anti-communist materials and publicized pro-Communist materials. The communists undertook widespread thought-reform campaigns across China to promote Marxist “proletarian” thought against corrupting “bourgeois” philosophies. During the Cultural Revolution, Red Guards persecuted tens of millions of people, many of whom were intellectuals that were not strict adherents to Maoist thought.¹⁸ The system Mao put in place is the foundation for the today’s system.

CHINA’S MODERN INFORMATION CONTROL

Since taking power in 2013, Xi Jinping has made consolidating CCP control of information a top priority. In a 2013 speech, he urged the party to “wage a war to win over public opinion” and to form a “strong internet army to seize the ground of new media.”¹⁹ He has centralized much of the information pipeline through the highest ranks of the party, while maintaining that online public opinion control should be the “highest priority.”²⁰ As a result, domestically, China has an almost complete control of formal channels of information. News media are controlled by the party, external content is scrubbed or banned outright, and films and television show the glory and benevolence of China. Dissenting voices tend to disappear, and literature that does not

¹⁷ Qilin Fu, “The Reception of Mao’s ‘Talks at the Yan’an Forum on Literature and Art’ in English-Language Scholarship,” *CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture* 17, no. 1 (March 1, 2015), <https://doi.org/10.7771/1481-4374.2567>.

¹⁸ Austin Ramzy, “China’s Cultural Revolution, Explained,” *The New York Times*, May 14, 2016, sec. World, <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/05/15/world/asia/china-cultural-revolution-explainer.html>.

¹⁹ “习近平：胸怀大局把握大势着眼大事 努力把宣传思想工作做得更好--新闻报道-人民网,” accessed December 17, 2019, <http://cpc.people.com.cn/n/2013/0821/c64094-22636876.html>.

²⁰ “Make Online Public Opinion Work the Top Priority of Propaganda and Ideological Work,” accessed December 17, 2019, <http://theory.people.com.cn/n/2013/1031/c40537-23387807.html>.

support the regime's values is disposed of.²¹ Online, the internet is separated from foreign internet services by what is colloquially known as the "Great Firewall", and all media is censored by the CCP.²² Social media applications like Twitter, Instagram, WhatsApp, and Facebook are blocked in China, replaced by government censored and sanitized Chinese alternatives including Weibo and WeChat. Additionally, China has built up the "50-Cent Army," a vast bureaucratic propaganda network so named because of unsubstantiated rumors that posters were paid 50 cents per post. This online army creates at least 500 million fabricated social media posts per year.²³ Because of the Russian efforts to meddle in the United States elections in 2016 and 2018 as well as their efforts to influence public opinion worldwide, it is common to assume that disinformation work is inherently divisive. Yet, in China it is nearly the opposite case. The 50-Cent Party almost never responds to critics or tries to inflame social cleavages. Instead, almost 90% of their domestic posts use complimentary techniques called flooding and cheerleading in which they flood social channels like Weibo with irrelevant positive messages about the party and the nation in an effort to drown out criticism. Much of the content posted is political and deliberately reframes current events and foreign affairs in a way that benefits the party. For example, during a crisis, a member might remind fellow citizens to "Respect to all the people who have greatly contributed to the prosperity and success of the Chinese civilization! The heroes of the people are immortal (向所有为中华民族繁荣富强做出

²¹ "Chinese Library Workers Burn Books Seen as Diverging from Teachings of Xi Jinping," The Independent, December 9, 2019, <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/asia/china-book-burning-library-xi-jinping-zhenyuan-a9239311.html>.

²² "Freedom on the Net 2018: The Rise of Digital Authoritarianism | Freedom House," accessed December 10, 2019, <https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-net/freedom-net-2018/rise-digital-authoritarianism>.

²³ "Beyond Hybrid War: How China Exploits Social Media to Sway American Opinion," 448, accessed December 8, 2019, <https://www.recordedfuture.com/china-social-media-operations/>.

伟大贡献的先人们致敬！人民英雄永垂不朽)。”²⁴ By overwhelming a conversation or topic on social media with irrelevant and empty information, users have less time and willingness to seek out and understand good information.²⁵ High volumes of propaganda can lead to familiarity and that familiarity increases the likelihood of accepting a viewpoint. Additionally, being overwhelmed with information (in particular from multiple channels) can lead people to take cognitive shortcuts in evaluating the trustworthiness of content.²⁶

Content is also overt by Western standards. Beijing’s longstanding control over information means that messages can be more blatantly bombastic and face less scrutiny from a public who have less access to competing facts and who are accustomed to government narratives. Finally, in addition to flooding, cheerleading, and overtness, domestic social media-based propaganda in China is known for displaying high levels of coordination. This is aligned with near perfect coordination of traditional media. In an analysis of 50-Cent Army content posted from January 2013 until December of 2014, researchers found that content was posted in “bursts” that coincide with significant events, likely directed by the highest levels of government, and, “a very strong correlation between the degree of coordination across newspapers and number of search results containing the strings of the coordinate articles.”²⁷

²⁴ Gary King, Jeniffer Pan, and Margaret E. Roberts, “How Censorship in China Allows Government Criticism but Silences Collective Expression,” *The American Political Science Review* 107, no. 2 (2013): 326–43.

²⁵ Roberts, Margaret, *Censored: Distraction and Diversion Inside China’s Great Firewall* (Princeton University Press, 2018).

²⁶ “The Psychological Impact of Information Warfare & Fake News,” *Psycom.Net - Mental Health Treatment Resource Since 1986* (blog), accessed March 26, 2020, <https://www.psycom.net/iwar.1.html>.

²⁷ Roberts, Margaret, *Censored: Distraction and Diversion Inside China’s Great Firewall*.

While it is challenging to directly correlate the internal propaganda to any sort of success metric, the available evidence suggests the current techniques are working. Public trust seems to be increasing in tandem with the increased focus and investment in propaganda and

Figure 2: Coordinated newspaper pages complimenting Chinese President Xi Jinping

disinformation under President Xi. On the “2020 Edelman Trust Barometer”, a measure of citizens trust in their government, China had the trust of 82% of the population. This is the highest percentage ever recorded and is a continuation of a positive trend for the CCP.²⁸ In another study, a majority of Chinese citizens believe China has a stronger military and economy than the United States.²⁹ In other subjective

measures, a government propaganda documentary

about Xi Jinping’s reshaping in China has become the highest grossing documentary in Chinese history, and according to researchers the government has successfully convinced the mainland population that Hong Kong protestors are pushing for full independence from China.^{30 31} Taken together, a host of key indicators suggest domestic information control efforts are quite effective at achieving their goals.

²⁸ “2019 Edelman Trust Barometer | Edelman,” accessed December 17, 2019, <https://www.edelman.com/trust-barometer>.

²⁹ Chicago Council on Global Affairs, “Views from the G2: Public Opinion in the US & China,” Chicago Council on Global Affairs, November 30, 2016, <https://www.thechicagocouncil.org/publication/views-g2-public-opinion-us-china>.

³⁰ Zheping Huang, “China’s Top-Grossing Documentary of All Time Is about How Great Xi Jinping Is,” Quartz, accessed December 17, 2019, <https://qz.com/1229834/amazing-china-chinas-top-grossing-documentary-of-all-time-is-about-how-great-xi-jinping-is/>.

³¹ “Can Beijing Export Its Manipulation of Information?,” *Atlantic Council* (blog), October 23, 2019, <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/new-atlanticist/can-beijing-export-its-manipulation-of-information/>.

STATE POLICY PRIORITIES DRIVE FOREIGN DISINFORMATION GOALS

It can be easy to think of disinformation campaigns as individual occurrences that are meant to achieve a specific purpose. The word “campaign” conjures an image of a specific event or moment in time, and does not help this misconception. For the most part however, foreign disinformation campaigns are not this narrow in scope, instead they are typically in direct service of the long-term policy goals of a state.³² That is, while a state’s domestic disinformation apparatus explains how they will engage in foreign disinformation, the actual decision to initiate a campaign and the goals of that effort are largely explained by the goals of the state. Therefore, to understand China’s disinformation efforts, we need to ask the question; what does the Chinese Communist Party want?

WHAT THE CHINESE GOVERNMENT WANTS

Since the ascension of Xi Jinping and his subsequent centralization of power, there has been a shift in the strategic priorities of the Chinese state. According to the former Australian Prime Minister Kevin Rudd, now a frequent commentator, China under Xi Jinping has the following seven core interests:

1. Maintaining the ruling party position and the socialist system;
2. Keeping national unity of mainland China and Tibet, Xinjiang, Inner Mongolia, and Taiwan;

3. promoting sustainable economic development;
4. Developing stable relations with 14 neighboring countries;
5. Expanding China's sea power, including the South China Sea and the East China Sea;
6. Deepening the win–win cooperation with developing countries; and finally,
7. Continuing to reform the current Western liberal order led by the United States³³

While these are rather broad goals, the CCP and by extension the Chinese government has taken aggressive steps to achieve each. China has spread disinformation in service of each of these interests, but the case studies covered here relate directly to the first, the second, the third, and the seventh. Understanding these four policy priorities will help explain the policy spaces in which the CCP is likely to engage in propaganda and disinformation work.

This approach is not unique to China, if analysts want to predict where Iran or India, or Saudi Arabia is likely to engage in disinformation work, they will need to understand the policy priorities of those states. It seems obvious that a state will commit resources to policy areas that are strategically important to them. However, this is not how analysts, journalists, scholars, private firms and others approach disinformation research today. Instead, they identify a campaign, and then attempt to retroactively determine the motivation behind that effort. If researchers want to identify disinformation campaigns as early as possible, then understanding the foreign policy goals of a given threat actor will be an important aspect of their strategy.

³³ “How Xi Jinping Views the World,” accessed February 24, 2020, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/china/2018-05-10/how-xi-jinping-views-world>.

POLICY PRIORITY: MAINTAINING THE RULING PARTY POSITION AND SOCIALIST SYSTEM

Maintaining the power of the party and the socialist system is the primary goal of the CCP under Xi.³⁴ Under President Xi, China has reversed the privatization trend that started in the 1980s under Deng Xiaoping and is largely credited with driving China's economic rise.³⁵ While the changes should not be overdramatized, they do strongly imply that Xi prioritizes party control over economic growth. The CCP leadership understands the relationship between economic prosperity and calls for a more liberal politics, and has tried to preemptively squash this threat with increased propaganda, greater control of information pipelines, and more aggressive countermeasures against external nations and individuals willing to challenge the party line.³⁶ These measures are reflected in foreign disinformation efforts which often seek to bury narratives that run counter to the established party line on various issues.

POLICY PRIORITY: KEEPING NATIONAL UNITY OF MAINLAND CHINA AND TIBET, XINJIANG, INNER MONGOLIA, AND TAIWAN

National unification issues are important to the CCP in part thanks to their relationship with the legitimacy of the party. Since dynastic times there has been an association between a unified China and a strong China. From a practical standpoint, there are strategic benefits to each

³⁴ Julia Lovell, *Maoism: A Global History*, n.d.

³⁵ Arthur Kroeber, *China's Economy: What Everyone Needs to Know*, n.d.

³⁶ "How Xi Jinping Views the World."

disputed region.³⁷ While the list is not exhaustive, the disinformation campaigns analyzed in this paper are all directly related to this priority.

POLICY PRIORITY: PROMOTING SUSTAINABLE ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT

In 2013 upon taking office, President Xi claimed under his leadership, Chinese foreign policy would be categorized by, “friendship, honesty, benefit, and tolerance.”³⁸ While Xi has violated the spirit of this message on numerous occasions, it underlines the importance of managing relations with neighbors and trading partners to maintain economic growth and the realization of financial prosperity for Chinese citizens. A common (and arguably justifiable) refrain used to defend the actions of the Chinese government is to treat economic growth as a justification for any negative actions. The CCP must maintain economic stability to maintain external strength and internal legitimacy. This focus manifests in pro-China online propaganda directed towards major trading partners. While this propaganda does not always reach the threshold of deliberate falsehood needed to call it disinformation, this priority explains the positive (non-divisive) tone that has historically characterized the majority of Chinese disinformation.

POLICY PRIORITY: TRANSFORMING THE CURRENT UNITED STATES LED WORLD ORDER

Finally, China seeks to continue transforming the United States led, post WW2, world order. In 1990, then Chinese leader Deng Xiaoping explained China’s foreign policy doctrine as ,“hide

³⁷ “China-Taiwan Relations,” Council on Foreign Relations, accessed February 24, 2020, <https://www.cfr.org/background/china-taiwan-relations>.

³⁸ “US Containment Frays China’s Nerves - Global Times,” accessed February 27, 2020, <http://www.globaltimes.cn/content/827508.shtml>.

your strength and bide your time”.³⁹ His statement clearly contrasts with a 2017 speech in which Xi Jinping said, “It is time for us to take center stage in the world and to make a greater contribution to humankind.” Unlike other states engaging in foreign disinformation including Russia, Iran, and Venezuela, most analysts do not believe China seeks to completely overthrow the present arrangement.⁴⁰ Their financial rise was driven by integration with the world economy and political system and at present they have little desire (or ability) to overthrow it. Rather, they would like to continue to transform the system in a way that positions them above the United States as the dominant player. This is exemplified by the \$400 billion plus Belt and Road Initiative, which gives the CCP soft power, economic leverage, and resources in 86 nations around the world.⁴¹ They will continue to use this positioning to normalize their values, their economic priorities, and their authoritarian form of governance. This extends to their disinformation work which as we will see, is willing to engage in any place that threatens that rise.

While focusing on policy priorities can shed light on the topic and purpose of a disinformation campaign, it will not illuminate the style, methods, and tone of that campaign. To understand those elements of a state’s disinformation campaign, we need to understand previous campaigns by that state.

³⁹ Charles Clover, “Xi Jinping Signals Departure from Low-Profile Policy,” October 20, 2017, <https://www.ft.com/content/05cd86a6-b552-11e7-a398-73d59db9e399>.

⁴⁰ “Where Is China’s Foreign Policy Headed?,” ChinaFile, February 8, 2019, <https://www.chinafile.com/conversation/where-chinas-foreign-policy-headed>.

⁴¹ “The World China Wants,” *Atlantic Council* (blog), April 14, 2019, <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/content-series/inflection-points/the-world-china-wants/>.

EARLY CAMPAIGNS MIRROR DOMESTIC CAMPAIGNS: TIBET AND XINJIANG 2012

While there is not a platform, methodology, or message common to all state's early online foreign disinformation campaigns, they all share one common feature; they exist in states with robust existing domestic disinformation practices.⁴² While states are targeting different audiences, early foreign disinformation campaigns typically mirror domestic efforts in substance and style. As in the case of China, a state's domestic disinformation tradition can involve a mix of historical tradition, modern culture, and immediate policy concerns, giving researchers a starting point to understand foreign campaigns. In China, we can see this mirroring when analyzing both a 2012 campaign against Tibetan and Uighur populations, and a 2017 campaign to disrupt Taiwan's 2018 elections.

Even though the campaign against the Tibetan and Uighur populations was never tied directly back to the Chinese Government, the scope, coordination and content of the operation strongly suggests the Chinese government was the source.⁴³ This multi-regional campaign was operational as early as 2012 and then exposed and subsequently shut down in 2014.⁴⁴ It was initiated in direct service of China's long-term foreign policy goal of national reunification.⁴⁵ Internally, the Uighur and Tibetan populations represent threats to Chinese unity and stability.

⁴² "The Global Disinformation Order: 2019 Global Inventory of Organised Social Media Manipulation – The Computational Propaganda Project."

⁴³ "Free Tibet Exposes Fake Twitter Accounts by China Propagandists | World News | The Guardian," accessed January 29, 2020, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/jul/22/free-tibet-fake-twitter-accounts-china-propagandists>.

⁴⁴ "Twitter Bots Target Tibetan Protests — Krebs on Security," accessed January 29, 2020, <https://krebsonsecurity.com/2012/03/twitter-bots-target-tibetan-protests/>.

⁴⁵ Jinghao Zhou, "China's Core Interests and Dilemma in Foreign Policy Practice," *Pacific Focus* 34, no. 1 (2019): 31–54, <https://doi.org/10.1111/pafo.12131>.

Externally, they symbolize brutal repression of minority populations under Chinese authoritarian rule.⁴⁶ The goal of the 2012 campaign was to hide or sanitize actions against both groups. The campaign was run on Twitter which is banned in China, suggesting (along with the primarily English content), that the campaign was targeting the international community. Three aspects of the campaign stand out as being significant; the use of cheerleading, the use of flooding, and a relative lack of sophistication.

In domestic propaganda campaigns, the Chinese government tends to rely on cheerleading in order to reinforce positive messaging on the party and nation.⁴⁷ In the 2012 campaign, they used the same technique to paint an idyllic picture of life in Tibet under Chinese rule.⁴⁸

According to the New York Times, “There are photographs of Tibetans in “unique exotic dress,” articles showcasing the Tibetan people’s deep appreciation for China’s governance of the region and video clips that portray happy Tibetans singing and dancing on state-run television.”⁴⁹ Similar messaging was used to portray the quality of life for the Uighur people in Xinjiang. In both cases, content included positive messaging about the work of the Chinese government in the contested region.

⁴⁶ Philippe Le Corre and Philippe Le Corre, “China: More Authoritarianism, More Uncertainty,” Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, accessed February 1, 2020, <https://carnegieendowment.org/2018/03/05/china-more-authoritarianism-more-uncertainty-pub-75749>.

⁴⁷ “Beyond Hybrid War: How China Exploits Social Media to Sway American Opinion.”

⁴⁸ “Free Tibet Exposes Fake Twitter Accounts by China Propagandists | World News | The Guardian.”

⁴⁹ Andrew Jacobs, “It’s Another Perfect Day in Tibet!,” *The New York Times*, July 21, 2014, sec. World, <https://www.nytimes.com/2014/07/22/world/asia/trending-attractive-people-sharing-upbeat-news-about-tibet.html>.

One benefit of a hashtag-driven social media experience is the ability to concentrate the conversation around a given theme.⁵⁰ Unfortunately, this concentration makes it easy for well-resourced actors to flood the medium. Chinese bots and trolls used #tibet and #freetibet with enough frequency to drown out voices critical of the CCP. As was the case domestically, this campaign was not focused on responding to critics, instead it used flooding and cheerleading to

Figure 3: Tweet meant to show the happy lifestyle of Tibetans living under Chinese rule

control the conversation. This technique would give an unsuspecting user the impression that the Tibetan and Uighur people were thriving and appreciative of the Chinese government's efforts on their behalf.

The 2012 campaign was not sophisticated. Accounts featured stock profile photos and photos of known models and celebrities. Account names were often just

combinations of two English first names such as Oliver Nina and Felix James.⁵¹ To be clear, a lack of sophisticated content does not necessarily mean that a campaign will not be successful. If a regime is able to obscure criticism with positive messaging, the heavy-handedness of the campaign might not be a problem. For example, the Russian effort to influence the 2016 United States election was effective at engaging with the American populace despite obvious mistakes

⁵⁰ "History of Hashtags: How a Symbol Changed the Way We Search & Share," accessed January 30, 2020, <https://socialmediaweek.org/blog/2018/02/history-hashtags-symbol-changed-way-search-share/>.

⁵¹ Jacobs, "It's Another Perfect Day in Tibet!"

including the use of Russian currency, technical signatures showing Russian IP addresses, and the use of Russian phone numbers.⁵²

The Chinese campaign also shows clear coordination between accounts in terms of content and timing. While it is unclear whether this includes coordination with domestic media, the campaign loosely aligns with an increase in protests within Tibet which received widespread foreign coverage.⁵³

The 2012 Tibet and Xinjiang campaign bore striking resemblance to the domestic online propaganda attributed to the CCP and subsidiaries. It utilized flooding and cheerleading, lacked subtlety and displayed multiple levels of coordination.

Figure 4 : Examples of CCP flooding conversations around Tibet in 2014

LATER CAMPAIGNS DIVERGE FROM DOMESTIC SIGNATURES: TAIWAN 2017

The second well-documented Chinese foreign disinformation campaign was an effort started in 2017 to influence the 2018 elections in Taiwan in favor of politicians favorable to the CCP.⁵⁴

⁵² Matthew Rosenberg, Nicole Perlroth, and David E. Sanger, "'Chaos Is the Point': Russian Hackers and Trolls Grow Stealthier in 2020," *The New York Times*, January 10, 2020, sec. U.S., <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/01/10/us/politics/russia-hacking-disinformation-election.html>.

⁵³ By the CNN Wire Staff, "Timeline of Tibetan Protests in China," CNN, accessed March 28, 2020, <https://www.cnn.com/2012/01/31/world/asia/tibet-protests-timeline/index.html>.

⁵⁴ Casey Corcoran, Bo Julie Crowley, and Raina Davis, "Disinformation Threat Watch," n.d., 46.

This campaign continues a long-running strategy known as the “United Front,” mixing disinformation and economic coercion as part of an overall reunification strategy. In a recent speech, Chinese President Xi Jinping stressed how unification is “a historical conclusion drawn over the 70 years of the development of cross-strait relations, and a must for the great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation in the new era.”⁵⁵

Like the 2012 operation, the 2017 campaign copies China’s domestic efforts but deviates in tone and style. The campaign effectively utilizes flooding and cheerleading, but is also overt in messaging and unsophisticated in methodology. The lack of subtlety in online messaging is striking given the long history of overt propaganda from mainland China. Taiwanese citizens are familiar with Chinese propaganda outside of social media, and many believe it is easy to recognize inauthentic content.⁵⁶ One Taiwanese technology investor, when asked about the 2017 campaign said, “When we were in elementary school, we were told we shouldn’t be so close to the Chinese government. Whenever we see the information, we hesitate and question whether it is real or not. I don’t think there’s a real problem and it doesn’t influence us much.” One of the goals of the mainland’s online disinformation campaigns is the illusion of organic content, making the lack of subtlety on an island with a long history of CCP propaganda particularly noteworthy. In addition to the messaging lacking subtlety, much of the content was actually written in simplified characters that are popular in Mainland China but not

⁵⁵ Russell Hsiao, “China Is Changing the Status Quo in the Taiwan Strait,” Text, The National Interest, January 9, 2019, <https://nationalinterest.org/feature/china-changing-status-quo-taiwan-strait-41062>.

⁵⁶ Corcoran, Crowley, and Davis, “Disinformation Threat Watch.”

common in Taiwan.⁵⁷ The simplest explanation for this is that increasing the quality of disinformation past a certain level has diminishing returns in terms of cost. Translating content to a new language is one thing, but the additional effort required to account for subtext, colloquial phrasing, and stylistic differences requires extensive training. It's important to stress that flooding does not require perfect content to be successful. If a message gets seen enough, many viewers will internalize the content. Furthermore, each time content is engaged with or forwarded to others serves to legitimize the content, regardless of the actual quality.

While the 2017 Taiwan case is still clearly derivative of Chinese domestic propaganda, one significant difference is an increase in malicious and divisive content more characteristic of the Russian disinformation model. One infamous example was a story which falsely claimed that Taiwan had stranded tourists in a flooded Japanese airport during a typhoon. This fake story prompted the suicide of Su Chii-Cherng, a Taiwanese diplomat in Japan.⁵⁸ This evolution towards maliciousness has become an increasingly noticeable signature of Chinese foreign disinformation and signals a slow transformation away from the domestic mold.

Using the China case as an example, it is evident that early foreign disinformation campaigns tend to resemble domestic propaganda, rather than the stereotypical Russian model. One explanation for this difference is that the foreign policy goals of the individual campaigns differ,

⁵⁷ "China's Information War on Taiwan Ramps Up as Election Nears - Bloomberg," accessed February 1, 2020, <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2019-10-23/china-s-information-war-on-taiwan-ramps-up-as-election-nears>.

⁵⁸ "In the Name of 'Fake News,' Asian Governments Tighten Control on Social Media - Los Angeles Times," accessed December 9, 2019, <https://www.latimes.com/world/asia/la-fg-asia-fake-news-20190130-story.html>.

therefore the type of campaign differs. While this is certainly true, it would not explain the similarities in content between domestic and foreign that clearly limited the effectiveness of campaigns. This tactical misstep is best illustrated through a foreign disinformation apparatus that has not yet emerged from its domestic origins, such as that of China. As a state continues to engage in long-term foreign disinformation work, their foreign disinformation apparatus tends to mature. Methods, tone, and style of foreign campaigns tend to become distinct from domestic efforts, and operations tend to become more sophisticated.⁵⁹ The evolution of the CCP foreign disinformation apparatus is best demonstrated by their recent (and ongoing) efforts to influence opinions around the protests in Hong Kong.

RECENT CAMPAIGNS SHOW CLEAR DISTINCTIONS FROM DOMESTIC: HONG KONG 2019

In line with previous CCP foreign disinformation campaigns, the Hong Kong campaign is in service of maintaining what the Chinese government sees as national unity. China sees Hong Kong as a longstanding part of the mainland that has temporarily drifted from home.⁶⁰ For a century, Hong Kong was a British colony until 1997 when a deal was created to return Hong Kong to China under the principle of “one country, two systems.”⁶¹ This system was meant to guarantee Hong Kong some level of economic and political sovereignty as well as protection for a range of human rights not guaranteed on the mainland. This deal was meant to last 50 years but under President Xi Jinping, China’s government has sought increasing influence in the

⁵⁹ “Global Cyber Troops 2018,” accessed November 8, 2019, https://www.zotero.org/groups/2125315/global_cyber_troops_2018?

⁶⁰ East Asian Studies B. A., “Hong Kong vs. China: What’s All the Fighting About?,” ThoughtCo, accessed March 27, 2020, <https://www.thoughtco.com/china-vs-hong-kong-687344>.

⁶¹ “Hong Kong’s Protests Explained | Amnesty International,” accessed March 1, 2020, <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2019/09/hong-kong-protests-explained/>.

region, with Xi warning that attempts to sow division with the mainland would lead to "bodies smashed and bones ground to powder."⁶² Since the 2014 Umbrella Movement protests for full democracy, Hong Kong citizens have felt that their special status has been continuously encroached upon by mainland authorities.⁶³

While the protests in 2019 were ostensibly a reaction to a proposed extradition bill with the Chinese government, that bill has since been withdrawn. The protestors continue to fight for four demands:

1. For the protests not to be characterized as riots
2. For the granting of amnesty to arrested protesters
3. For an independent inquiry into alleged police brutality
4. For implementation of complete universal suffrage

The continued violence and brutality of the crackdown against largely peaceful protestors have led to shocking headlines around the world and increasing condemnation of the Chinese government. While the position of the protestors has been well documented, there has been minimal media coverage of China's position. Why does the CCP care about Hong Kong enough to justify the severity of the crackdown? In addition to the national unity argument, Hong Kong provides significant financial and security benefits to Beijing. Hong Kong facilitates the majority

⁶² "The Hong Kong Protests Explained in 100 and 500 Words - BBC News," accessed March 1, 2020, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-china-49317695>.

⁶³ Jeffery Wasserstrom, *Vigil: Hong Kong on the Brink*, Columbia Global Reports (Columbia Global Reports, 2020).

of outside investment in China and processes the majority of financial transactions with the mainland.⁶⁴ Over 1000 mainland companies are listed on the Hong Kong stock exchange as investors who are unwilling to invest in an uncertain mainland business environment, are willing to invest through Hong Kong.⁶⁵

The first known evidence of a coordinated disinformation effort related to the Hong Kong protests is a tweet on April 14th, 2019.⁶⁶ The dominant themes of the content include condemnation of the protestors, theories of foreign involvement (#WhatIsAmericaUpTo was promoted by CCTV on social media), and support for the ‘rule of law’ and Hong Kong police. Content proliferated in Mandarin, Cantonese, English, Indonesian, Arabic, Spanish and other languages. The majority was in Mandarin, Cantonese, and English, suggesting the desired audiences were expats living abroad (including Chinese expats living in Hong Kong), Hong Kong citizens and Western audiences.

The subsequent campaign has shown some of the signatures of domestic work, including attempts at flooding and heavy-handed messaging. However, this latest campaign also shows clear deviations from previous efforts in a few ways. The campaign shows elements of sophistication not seen in previous CCP efforts and is aggressively negative in tone and content.

⁶⁴ “Protests Won’t Stop China Needing Hong Kong,” accessed March 1, 2020, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2019/12/11/protests-alibaba-economy-china-still-needs-hong-kong/>.

⁶⁵ “Economic and Trade Information on Hong Kong | HKTDC,” accessed March 1, 2020, <http://hong-kong-economy-research.hktdc.com/business-news/article/Market-Environment/Economic-and-Trade-Information-on-Hong-Kong/etihk/en/1/1X000000/1X09OVUL.htm>.

⁶⁶ “Tweeting through the Great Firewall | Australian Strategic Policy Institute | ASPI,” accessed March 1, 2020, <https://www.aspi.org.au/report/tweeting-through-great-firewall>.

Figure 5: Two fake accounts showing coordinated posting of content.

Unlike previous efforts, this campaign was an immediate response to external events and not part of a well-defined schedule. Instead of building up capacity over time, the CCP managed to spin up a massive, dynamic, coordinated campaign

quickly. This is evidence of dedicated human resources who can run dynamic influence operations.⁶⁷ The speed of the operation did result in lower quality content. In an analysis of the operation, researchers from the International Cyber Policy Centre at the Australian Strategic Policy Institute noted this: “Audiences were not steered into self-contained disinformation ecosystems external to Twitter, nor were hashtags used to build audience, then drive the amplification of specific political positions.”⁶⁸ Since learning of the operation, Twitter has removed over 200,000 fake accounts, YouTube has removed over 200 videos, and Facebook has removed multiple accounts and groups.⁶⁹ The level of cross-platform coordination and the use of that many languages suggests a greater degree of competence than previous efforts.

⁶⁷ “Zotero | Groups > Global Cyber Troops 2018.”

⁶⁸ “Tweeting through the Great Firewall | Australian Strategic Policy Institute | ASPI.”

⁶⁹ “Hong Kong Protests: Twitter and Facebook Remove Chinese Accounts - BBC News,” accessed March 1, 2020, <https://www.bbc.com/news/technology-49402222>.

Finally, the campaign used a technique nicknamed “spamouflage” that involved hiding disinformation in a flood of generic spam content. An account might primarily post cat videos or random nonsensical clips, but then would randomly switch to posting overt political disinformation. This helps disguise the user’s intention but also might help fool social network detection algorithms.⁷⁰

In addition to sophistication, this campaign showed an unprecedented level of negativity. One tweet, in Cantonese claimed that, “This abnormal fetus of a “freak demonstration” that the opposition parties and Hong Kong independence people gave birth to is becoming more violent as it heads down this evil road.”⁷¹ Others called the protestors terrorists and showed images of destruction and chaos allegedly the result of widespread mobs. The purpose of this negativity seems to be to reverse the positive image of the protest movement outside the mainland. Evidently the government is willing to use negative divisive tactics despite their general policy goals of maintaining good relations and smothering negativity with the China Dream.

Figure 6: Tweet meant to spread negative image of protestors

⁷⁰ “Graphika Report: Spamouflage,” accessed November 15, 2019, <https://graphika.com/posts/graphika-report-spamouflage/>.

⁷¹ “Tweeting through the Great Firewall | Australian Strategic Policy Institute | ASPI.”

The ongoing Hong Kong disinformation campaign shows clear signs of an evolution away from the Chinese model of domestic propaganda. It is too soon to draw conclusions about future campaigns, but the current campaign is close to Russian-style meddling. Whether state disinformation campaigns become more uniform as techniques are perfected and states adopt best practices is not clear. The Chinese efforts suggest that states might adopt some practices from other states (negativity, contradictory messaging) while maintaining certain key unique characteristics (flooding, overtness).

IMPLICATIONS OF PROACTIVE APPROACH

Taken together, the domestic propaganda tradition, priority goals, and recent foreign disinformation campaigns of the Chinese Communist Party show a clear trajectory. The Chinese foreign disinformation apparatus arose out of the domestic tradition. Whereas originally their tactics and techniques mirrored their domestic approach, they gradually diverged. A cautionary note: The People's Republic of China has a unique propaganda history deeply rooted in the legacy of Mao Zedong and the Communist party. From this one case study, we cannot make sweeping proclamations about the likely disinformation trajectory of other states. Furthermore, research into this form of disinformation is nascent and needs to evolve to keep up with practice. Finally, online disinformation campaigns are, by design, difficult to detect and analyze. In 2019 a broad campaign originating in Iran was found to be removing content as soon it gained traction, suggesting that for some threat actors, avoiding detection is a higher priority

than effectiveness of content.⁷² The techniques used are also constantly evolving, so any analysis of unique signatures runs the risk of being quickly outdated. Because of this, it is likely that the actual number of actors and campaigns is significantly larger than the campaigns known to the general public.

These limitations acknowledged, this model for understanding foreign disinformation operations has two major implications for those trying to limit their influence. It allows for proactive analysis, and is applicable to all countries, not just those who model their operations on Russian techniques. We know that of the 38 countries with known medium to high cyber troop capacity, the majority are not known to have engaged in foreign influence operations on social media. It is reasonable to analyze the foreign policy goals and the domestic disinformation traditions of each of these states and predict the policy areas they are likely to interfere in and the likely TTPs of those efforts. If, for example, Turkey is deeply concerned about portraying their ongoing military incursions in Syria in a positive light, has a permanent cyber capacity of at least 500 people, and their domestic social media manipulation use bots and human flooding techniques to demonize Kurds and thereby stoke nationalist sentiments at home, then it's reasonable to assume they would be likely to target foreign audiences with similar messages.⁷³ Unsurprisingly, then, in 2019 while the US withdrawal opened up Northern

⁷² "Burned After Reading: Endless Mayfly's Ephemeral Disinformation Campaign," The Citizen Lab, May 14, 2019, <https://citizenlab.ca/2019/05/burned-after-reading-endless-mayflys-ephemeral-disinformation-campaign/>.

⁷³ Carlotta Gall, "Turkey Declares Major Offensive Against Syrian Government," *The New York Times*, March 1, 2020, sec. World, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/03/01/world/middleeast/turkey-syria-assault.html>; "Turkey Condemns Violence as Assad's Helicopters Open Fire - Telegraph," accessed March 22, 2020, <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/middleeast/syria/8569383/Turkey-condemns-violence-as-Assads-helicopters-open-fire.html>.

Syria for Turkish invasion, researchers identified a multifaceted Turkish campaign defending their actions and characterizing the Kurds as terrorists. Similar to domestic efforts, the campaign used positive, accessibly nationalist content to portray their military as an idealistic force purely focused on removing terrorists and protecting civilians. This post facto example is no substitute for reactive analysis, where researchers comb the web looking for active campaigns and react accordingly, but is a complimentary tool that avoids over-association with the stereotypical Russian approach.

Further research in this area should first try and determine whether the Chinese model is unique. While China does provide a clear case study, as more campaigns are identified, it should be increasingly possible to analyze the TTPs of foreign campaigns alongside their domestic efforts. This is important because it gives us a broader sample set of data to study macro-level trends in the disinformation space. Second, research should try and determine whether domestic efforts also change as foreign disinformation capacity is developed. Recent evidence suggests that CCP messaging on domestic platforms regarding Hong Kong protestors mirrors the abrasive tone of their foreign efforts.⁷⁴ Third, outside of the Russian efforts, little has been done to understand the effectiveness of disinformation campaigns. Many of the questions raised by this paper would be better answered with a quantitative understanding of the effectiveness of the various CCP campaigns analyzed. Finally, the role of artificial intelligence in deploying disinformation campaigns must be considered. While there has been

⁷⁴ Kate Conger, "Facebook and Twitter Say China Is Spreading Disinformation in Hong Kong," *The New York Times*, August 19, 2019, sec. Technology, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/08/19/technology/hong-kong-protests-china-disinformation-facebook-twitter.html>.

widespread adoption of automation technologies in order to greatly increase the scale of information operations, the larger concern is around text generation systems which can replicate the ways that humans talk both offline and online, making disinformation campaigns nearly impossible to detect.⁷⁵ As these systems continue to advance, they could render much of the conversation around disinformation TTPs meaningless as states simply train method-agnostic text-generation models to optimize for a given outcome. For example, this could involve training a model to generate text around a certain topic of interest that drives maximum engagement in relevant groups of interest. When human error is removed, content will be much harder to detect and much easier to scale. These models will quickly learn the content style necessary to craft a potentially unlimited supply of effective disinformation.

The state of disinformation is rapidly changing, but the effect continues to be massive. Understanding how states engage in foreign information operations is vital to protecting the public sphere and facilitating good governance. At the present time, the coronavirus has facilitated the greatest surge of disinformation in history, while social media content moderators fail.⁷⁶ In the midst of this crisis China's techniques (and those of others), have continued to evolve. In a fitting summation of this continued evolution, the Director of the Alliance for Securing Democracy tweeted on March 23rd 2020: "Chinese diplomats, going full Russian – spread multiple conflicting conspiracy theories, not to convince people of an

⁷⁵ Cade Metz and Scott Blumenthal, "How A.I. Could Be Weaponized to Spread Disinformation," *The New York Times*, June 7, 2019, sec. Technology, <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2019/06/07/technology/ai-text-disinformation.html>, <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2019/06/07/technology/ai-text-disinformation.html>.

⁷⁶ Elizabeth Dwoskin, "Why the Coronavirus Could Mean More Bogus Cures, Fake Government Crackdowns and Misinformation on Facebook," *Washington Post*, accessed March 23, 2020, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/technology/2020/03/23/facebook-moderators-coronavirus/>.

explanation but to create the idea that it's impossible to know the truth. First, time I've seen CCP pursue that approach, and an ominous sign of where it might go.”⁷⁷ United States intelligence operatives also assessed that Chinese operatives helped to aggressively amplify misinformation about a nation-wide federal lockdown.⁷⁸ The deceptive content was propagated via text message, a novel (and difficult to detect) technique in the disinformation space. Finally, and perhaps most concerning, we are seeing a convergence of actual content and narratives from various states. Recent investigations suggest that China, Iran, and Russia are engaging in disinformation campaigns using unified messages around China's response to the virus, the United States role in creating the virus with the help of Bill Gates, and more.⁷⁹ Taken together, these changes suggest an increased reliance on disinformation, even during a potential easing of tensions between Beijing and Washington.⁸⁰ At this time it is important to understand the emergence of the Chinese foreign disinformation apparatus. It is equally important to explore new methods for predicting and preventing the emergence of other states likely to engage in foreign disinformation work.

⁷⁷ Rosenberger, Laura, “Response to Chinese Efforts during Coronavirus,” Twitter, accessed March 23, 2020, <https://twitter.com/rosenbergerlm/status/1241860407037493251>.

⁷⁸ Edward Wong, Matthew Rosenberg, and Julian E. Barnes, “Chinese Agents Helped Spread Messages That Sowed Virus Panic in U.S., Officials Say,” *The New York Times*, April 22, 2020, sec. U.S., <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/04/22/us/politics/coronavirus-china-disinformation.html>.

⁷⁹ “State Report: Russian, Chinese and Iranian Disinformation Narratives Echo One Another - POLITICO,” accessed April 25, 2020, <https://www.politico.com/news/2020/04/21/russia-china-iran-disinformation-coronavirus-state-department-193107>.

⁸⁰ Julian E. Barnes, Matthew Rosenberg, and Edward Wong, “As Virus Spreads, China and Russia See Openings for Disinformation,” *The New York Times*, March 28, 2020, sec. U.S., <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/03/28/us/politics/china-russia-coronavirus-disinformation.html>.

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