



## Discursive statecraft: China's information operations

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*By Hannah Bailey*

Political actors, from individuals to countries, have historically used a multitude of techniques to influence public opinion through interventions in public discourse – ‘discursive statecraft’.<sup>1</sup> Public discourse has, however, increasingly moved from traditional forums, such as newspapers and television, to digital platforms. Consequently, political actors are developing new systems and strategies to manipulate public opinion in online environments. Among these actors are authoritarian states, of which the most well-resourced and prolific are the People’s Republic of China (PRC), Russia and Iran. Their discursive statecraft is targeted at both domestic and international audiences.

Given the PRC’s ‘counter-systemic’ intent, Chinese discursive statecraft is perhaps the most important. For this reason, this Primer investigates:

1. What the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) says in its messaging to international audiences;

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<sup>1</sup> For more on ‘discursive statecraft’, see: James Rogers, ‘Discursive statecraft: Preparing for national positioning operations’, Council on Geostrategy, 07/04/2021, <http://bit.ly/3moToN7> (checked: 07/03/2023) and Matthew Henderson, ‘How the Chinese Communist Party “positions” the United Kingdom’, Council on Geostrategy, 22/04/2021, <http://bit.ly/3nizzWq> (checked: 07/03/2023).



2. How the CCP uses international social media platforms to amplify this messaging; and,
3. How successful these messages are at reaching their target audiences.

What do authoritarian states seek to accomplish in manipulating international public discourse? There are three primary motivations. First, such states often attempt to manipulate international discourse as a means to gain international support. They seek to do this by influencing foreign governments via the targeting of their domestic populations.<sup>2</sup> Second, authoritarian states also attempt to disrupt or polarise the public in a rival state.<sup>3</sup> Third, influencing international discourse gives them an opportunity to reinforce their messaging towards their domestic audiences.<sup>4</sup>

This Primer describes the sea change in the targeting of international audiences by the CCP from the 1990s onwards, and from 2010 the increasing use of social media accounts – both authentic and inauthentic – to influence international discourse. While other authoritarian states, such as Russia, aim to use discursive statecraft to disrupt elections and amplify polarising narratives, the CCP appears to have two objectives. First, it seeks to project the image of the PRC as a responsible global leader engaging in peaceful diplomacy and humanitarianism. And second, it seeks to counter a variety of messages from rival powers, particularly the United States (US).

The effectiveness of these activities is, however, difficult to assess. There is evidence to suggest that their effectiveness is more limited than the volume of activity may indicate. But this is not a strong conclusion, as it would be premature to ignore the impact of this activity by the CCP. With this in mind, there are a variety of actions that governments, social media platforms and regulatory bodies can take to detect and limit the impact of these information operations on online discourse. Potential actions include the following: creating streamlined processes for reporting networks suspected to be inauthentic; training artificial intelligence (AI) tools to automate network detection; labelling state-backed social media accounts; and intervening to remove state-backed media accounts that are producing problematic content.

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<sup>2</sup> Craig Hayden, *The Rhetoric of Soft Power: Public Diplomacy in Global Contexts* (Lanham, Maryland: Lexington Books, 2011).

<sup>3</sup> Nathaniel Persily, 'The 2016 US Election: Can Democracy Survive the Internet?', *Journal of Democracy*, 28:2 (2017).

<sup>4</sup> Anne-Marie Brady, 'China's Foreign Propaganda Machine', Wilson Center, 26/10/2015, <http://bit.ly/3v8tGOz> (checked: 07/03/2023).

## How does the CCP shape domestic discourse in the PRC?

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A good starting point in understanding the CCP's interventions in international online discourse is to examine its track record of influencing domestic discourse, where the CCP uses a variety of tools. These tools serve one of three purposes: *preventing* discourse which the CCP deems problematic; *removing* this discourse when it appears; or *adding* desirable or distracting discourse into the information environment.

The CCP's *preventative* tools largely consist of surveillance technologies, which officials use in combination to monitor citizens. These include online behaviour monitoring, face, voice and iris recognition, and DNA biometrics.<sup>5</sup> Through the use of algorithms, these surveillance technologies aim to predict citizen activity and prevent behaviour or speech that the CCP deems undesirable. Surveillance technologies also have a chilling effect on discourse, leading individuals to self-censor for fear of being detected.<sup>6</sup> While these surveillance technologies in many cases inhibit speech that the CCP deems problematic, they cannot prevent it in all instances.

To address such gaps, and in addition to its use of surveillance technologies, the CCP also oversees a vast domestically focused censorship apparatus.<sup>7</sup> Social media companies operating in the PRC are required to follow domestic laws and regulations on content moderation.<sup>8</sup> This entails *removing* content deemed inappropriate or problematic by the CCP through dynamic keyword and URL filtering, among other techniques.<sup>9</sup>

Finally, after *preventing* or *removing* any undesirable content, the CCP uses both state-backed media outlets and inauthentic accounts to *add* desirable or distracting narratives into domestic online discourse. State-backed media outlets help guide domestic online narratives by choosing which hashtags

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<sup>5</sup> Isabelle Qian, Muye Xiao, Paul Mozur and Alexander Cardia, 'Four Takeaways From a Times Investigation Into China's Expanding Surveillance State', *The New York Times*, 21/06/2022, <https://bit.ly/3W5hLOU> (checked: 07/03/2023).

<sup>6</sup> Perry Link, 'China: The Anaconda in the Chandelier', *ChinaFile*, 11/04/2002, <https://bit.ly/3VPoA7z> (checked: 07/03/2023).

<sup>7</sup> Margaret E. Roberts, *Censored: Distraction and Diversion Inside China's Great Firewall* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2018).

<sup>8</sup> Lotus Ruan, Jeffrey Knockel, Jason Q. Ng and Masashi Crete-Nishihata, 'One App, Two Systems: How WeChat uses one censorship policy in China and another internationally', *University of Toronto: The Citizen Lab*, 30/11/2016, <https://bit.ly/3YeKxhX> (checked: 07/03/2023).

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.* and Miles Kenyon, 'WeChat Surveillance Explained', *University of Toronto: The Citizen Lab*, 07/05/2020, <https://bit.ly/3W9o2sV> (checked: 07/03/2023).

and stories are promoted on domestic social media platforms.

Alongside state-backed media, the authorities use inauthentic social media accounts, which have the main purpose of misleading audiences, to flood social media platforms with messages that distract from unwanted narratives or promote ones that are favourable to the CCP.<sup>10</sup> These accounts are used in coordination with others to amplify online content.<sup>11</sup> The CCP uses an estimated two million people on a full-time basis to carry out this work, an effort buttressed by some twenty million part-time ‘network civilization volunteers’.<sup>12</sup> These paid commentators and volunteers are often referred to as the ‘Fifty-Cent Army’, and operate alongside grassroots internet commentators to ensure that the discourse on domestic social media platforms is favourable to the CCP.<sup>13</sup>

Together, these tools allow the CCP to *prevent* or *remove* discourse deemed problematic and *add* discourse deemed favourable to the party. These three techniques allow the CCP to set the agenda on domestic social media platforms, and wield considerable control over domestic online discourse. These tools have so-far proved useful for the CCP in managing domestic audiences. Yet the question remains as to whether it is able to re-purpose these same tools to control discourse on international social media platforms.

## How does CCP discursive statecraft differ from its domestic operations?

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It is important to note that the PRC’s domestic internet is largely isolated from the wider international internet environment. The so-called ‘Great Firewall’ acts as a barrier to prevent domestic internet users from accessing many international social media platforms.<sup>14</sup> This relative isolation enables the CCP to exercise considerable control over the social media platforms that

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<sup>10</sup> Gary King, Jennifer Pan and Margaret E. Roberts, ‘How Censorship in China Allows Government Criticism but Silences Collective Expression’, *The American Political Science Review*, 107:2 (2013).

<sup>11</sup> Twitter Safety, ‘Disclosing networks of state-linked information operations we’ve removed’, *Twitter Blog*, 12/06/2020, <https://bit.ly/3FflvGK> (checked: 07/03/2023).

<sup>12</sup> Ryan Fedasiuk, ‘China’s Internet Trolls Go Global’, Council on Foreign Relations, 07/06/2021, <https://bit.ly/3W45LNw> (checked: 07/03/2023).

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>14</sup> Dennis Normile, ‘Science suffers as China’s internet censors plug holes in great firewall’, *Science*, 30/08/2017, <https://bit.ly/3uFM3w7> (checked: 07/03/2023).

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serve its domestic audiences.<sup>15</sup>

It does not, however, exercise this same power over international social media platforms. This is because, for the most part, the CCP lacks the leverage over and access to international user data that is necessary for it to use its preventative surveillance tools or implement a censorship apparatus.<sup>16</sup> Instead, the key tool at the CCP's disposal is its ability to *add* information into the international online discourse environment.

### **Official state-backed media outlets and diplomat accounts**

In the 1990s, the CCP became aware of the need to increase its international influence in response to strong criticism of the party's handling of the Tiananmen Square incident in 1989.<sup>17</sup>

The CCP created the State Council Information Office in 1991 to broadcast a favourable image of the PRC's foreign policies internationally.<sup>18</sup> As part of this campaign, foreign-language branches of pre-existing state-backed media outlets were created, and between 2009 and 2010, officials spent a further US\$8.7 billion (£7.3 billion) on foreign propaganda efforts.<sup>19</sup> This funding was used in part to expand domestic state-backed news outlets internationally. The *People's Daily*, widely viewed as the mouthpiece of the CCP,<sup>20</sup> expanded its publishing capacity to include 12 languages, so it could reach a variety of international audiences.<sup>21</sup> Other domestic outlets, including *China Global Television Network (CGTN)*, *China Plus*, *Xinhua News Agency*, *China Daily* and the *Global Times* have also expanded their language offerings in order to gain more traction with foreign audiences.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> Notably, while it is possible to use a virtual private network (VPN) to bypass the 'Great Firewall', in recent years officials have restricted access to VPN services. See: Olivia Solon, 'China cracks down on VPNs, making it harder to circumvent Great Firewall', *The Guardian*, 23/01/2017, <http://bit.ly/3xW2PIF> (checked: 07/03/2023) and Lyric Li, 'China pledges to slowly exit "zero covid"', *The Washington Post*, 02/12/2022, <http://bit.ly/3ZgVXBl> (checked: 07/03/2023).

<sup>16</sup> There are, of course, exceptions, such as international users of WeChat.

<sup>17</sup> Anne-Marie Brady, 'China in Xi's "New Era": New Zealand and the CCP's "Magic Weapons"', *Journal of Democracy*, 29:2 (2018), pp. 3-4 and Yiwei Wang, 'Public Diplomacy and the Rise of Chinese Soft Power', *The ANNALS of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, 616:1 (2008), p. 258.

<sup>18</sup> Anne-Marie Brady, 'China in Xi's "New Era": New Zealand and the CCP's "Magic Weapons"', *Journal of Democracy*, 29:2 (2018), p. 4.

<sup>19</sup> David Shambaugh, 'China Flexes Its Soft Power', *The New York Times*, 07/06/2010, <https://bit.ly/3HsQku7> (checked: 07/03/2023).

<sup>20</sup> Baohui Xie, *Media Transparency in China: Rethinking Rhetoric and Reality* (Lanham, Maryland: Lexington Books, 2014), p. 9.

<sup>21</sup> 'People's Daily Online launches versions in Swahili, Italian, and Kazakh (Cyrillic script)', *People's Daily Online*, 01/09/2021, <https://bit.ly/3iTWvoa> (checked: 07/03/2023).

<sup>22</sup> Anne-Marie Brady, *Marketing Dictatorship: Propaganda and Thought Work in Contemporary China* (Lanham, Maryland: Rowman and Littlefield, 2007), p. 131.

Alongside the expansion in state-backed media reach, Chinese diplomats stationed overseas have also become increasingly active on international social media platforms. Between 2010 and 2021, 189 social media accounts attributed to PRC embassies, ambassadors, consuls, and other embassy staff joined Twitter alone.<sup>23</sup> Together, both the presence of multiple-language state-backed media output and narratives shaped by the PRC's diplomats appearing on international social media platforms represent an increasing effort by the CCP to shape international discourse.

### *The size of the PRC's audiences on Facebook*

Efforts to better diffuse CCP-friendly narratives among large numbers of international social media users, and thus international audiences, have been broadly successful. One platform where the PRC's state-backed media outlets are particularly active is Facebook, where they have amassed a large following. Graph 1 illustrates the number of Facebook posts published by seven of the PRC's most prolific state-backed media outlets from 2011 to 2022 (*China Xinhua News*, *CGTN*, *China Daily*, *People's Daily*, *China*, *China Central Television (CCTV)* and *China.org.cn*). Similarly, Graph 2 gives the volume of likes by other Facebook users with the PRC's state-backed media accounts for the same period.

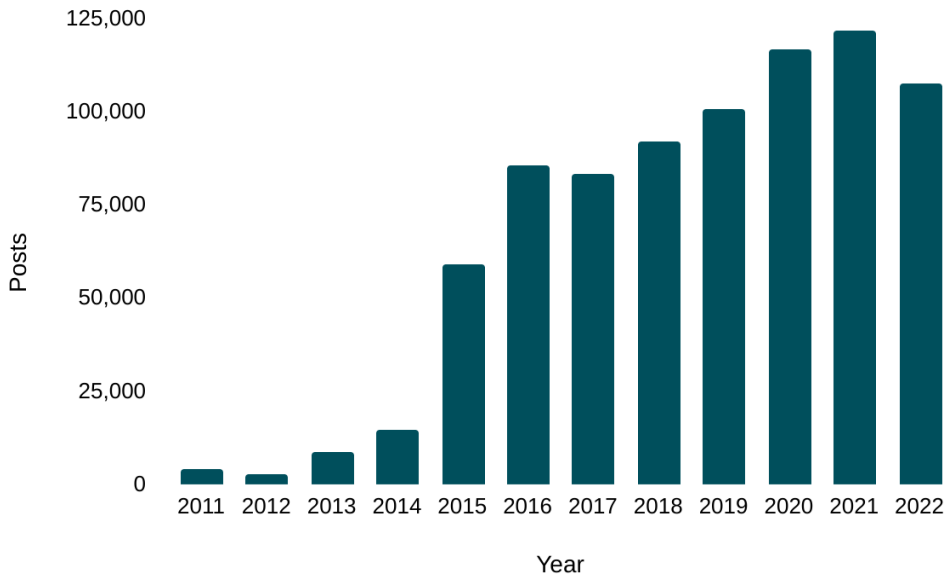
Graph 1 shows the growth in the PRC's international narrative forming efforts on Facebook over the past 11-year period. There is a sharp jump in post volume in 2015, and then a continued increase to 2021, with a small drop off in 2022. Nonetheless a sustained increase is evident; over the past ten years (2012–2022) the number of posts by these seven outlets has increased by approximately 3,600%. The number of likes received by these posts is, however, more variable. Both post volume and user likes feature a significant increase from 2014 to 2015, which follows the ascension to power of Xi Jinping, most notably becoming General Secretary of the CCP in 2012.<sup>24</sup> However, while the supply of state-backed media posts illustrates a clear upward trend from 2015 onwards, the engagement of international users appears to be more variable, which may reflect such factors as changes in Facebook's algorithm or changes in the CCP's messaging strategy.

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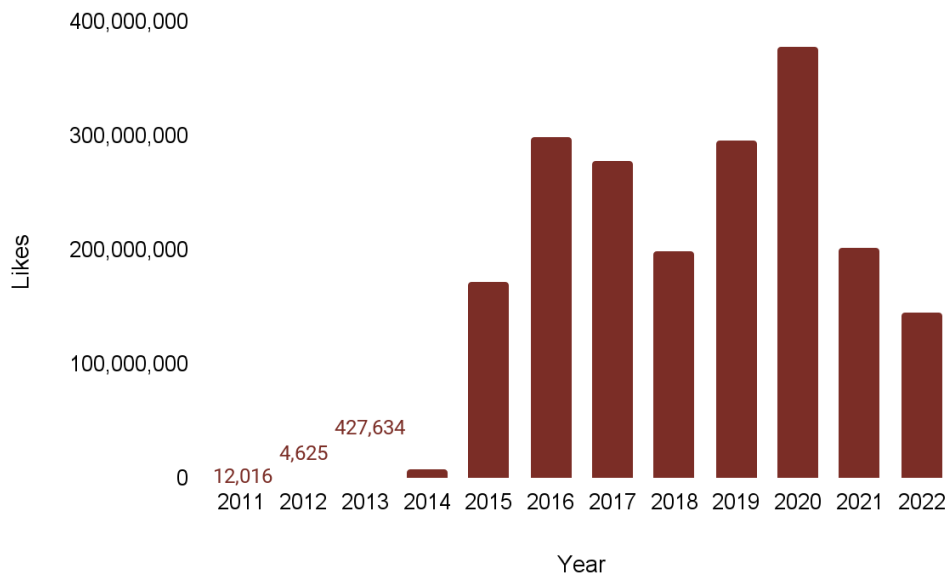
<sup>23</sup> Marcel Schliebs, Hannah Bailey, Jonathan Bright and Philip N. Howard, 'China's public diplomacy operations: understanding engagement and inauthentic amplifications of PRC diplomats on Facebook and Twitter', Oxford University: Programme on Democracy and Technology, 11/05/2021, <https://bit.ly/3hlplGr> (checked: 07/03/2023).

<sup>24</sup> Falk Hartig, 'How China Understands Public Diplomacy: The Importance of National Image for National Interests', *International Studies Review*, 18:4 (2016).

**Graph 1: Facebook post volume<sup>25</sup>**



**Graph 2: Facebook User Likes<sup>26</sup>**



<sup>25</sup> Data gathered by the author on January 15th 2023 using Meta’s application programming interface. See: ‘CrowdTangle’, Meta, No date, <http://bit.ly/3J5o5lH> (checked: 07/03/2023).

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*

### ***The narratives amplified by the PRC's official Twitter and Facebook accounts***

What is the content of these messages that these accounts are amplifying? The CCP appears to have two objectives. First, these accounts aim to project the image of the PRC as a responsible global leader that engages in peaceful diplomacy. Second, these accounts attempt to counter a variety of messages from rival powers, with a focus on the US.<sup>27</sup> These objectives dovetail: the first is intended to improve the PRC's reputation among international audiences, while the second is designed to undermine the reputation of its rivals.

Given these two motivations, when and why does the CCP choose to either promote the PRC or undermine its rivals? The CCP's choice of narrative strategy is dependent on a variety of factors, including the media platform being used, whether the mouthpiece is the media or a diplomat, as well as fluctuating geopolitical events.

The PRC's state-backed media outlets have propagated both diplomatic and aggressively critical narratives.<sup>28</sup> During the first few months of the Covid-19 pandemic, the PRC's state-backed media spread three key messages.<sup>29</sup> First, these outlets criticised the initial response by democratic countries to the pandemic. An article in *CGTN*, for example, argued that Covid-19 had revealed the US to be a weak international leader.<sup>30</sup> Second, the PRC's state-backed media outlets also praised the PRC's own global aid distribution efforts and medical research on the virus. Articles in international online editions of the PRC's state-backed media organs applauded the PRC's international medical aid programmes, highlighting the distribution of Chinese medical supplies to European countries.<sup>31</sup> These outlets also claimed that traditional Chinese medicine (TCM) was an effective treatment for Covid-19.<sup>32</sup> Third, the PRC's state-backed media outlets spread conspiracy theories on the origins of the Covid-19 virus, in an apparent attempt to shift blame for the outbreak from itself onto other

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<sup>27</sup> Ingrid d'Hooghe, 'China's Public Diplomacy Goes Political', *The Hague Journal of Diplomacy*, 30:3-4 (2021).

<sup>28</sup> Aggressively critical narratives are defined as those that 'aggressively counter Western states, and in particular the US, to foster domestic nationalism'. Here, diplomatic narratives are defined as those that entail 'projecting the image of a responsible global leader adhering to international norms of peace and humanitarianism'. Hannah Bailey, 'Peaceful World Leadership or Nationalist Advocate? How China Uses Social Media to Project its Stance on Russia's Invasion of Ukraine', *Case Western Reserve Law Review*, unpublished.

<sup>29</sup> Jonathan Bright et al., 'Coronavirus Coverage by State-Backed English-Language News Sources: Understanding Chinese, Iranian, Russian and Turkish Government Media', Oxford University: Internet Institute, 08/04/2020, <https://bit.ly/3YZpShU> (checked: 07/03/2023) p. 7.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*





countries – CGTN published an editorial speculating that the US military was responsible for the emergence of the virus in Wuhan.<sup>33</sup>

Similarly, as Russia's full-scale war against Ukraine began in early 2022, the PRC's state-backed media moved from diplomatic narratives to criticisms of the actions of free and open countries.<sup>34</sup> In the initial aftermath of Russia's lunge towards Kyiv in February, the PRC's state-backed media predominantly discussed topics related to Chinese diplomatic and humanitarian efforts in Ukraine, alongside its role in developments regarding peace talks between Russia and Ukraine. By April 2022, however, these outlets had moved towards overtly criticising liberal democracies, and in particular the US. Between April and June much of the PRC's state-backed media outlet discourse on Ukraine blamed the US, and more broadly the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO), for the war's continuation.<sup>35</sup> In June, for example, one Facebook post by a state-backed media outlet stated that:

It's been 100 days since the onset of the Russia-Ukraine conflict. As the US-led West continues to fuel the crisis, observers say that prospects for peace remain elusive.<sup>36</sup>

The PRC's diplomats also engage with audiences on international social media platforms in so-called 'Wolf Warrior' diplomacy. The term 'Wolf Warrior' in this context refers to a more proactive and aggressive form of diplomacy, and is named after two nationalistic Chinese action blockbusters.<sup>37</sup> The aim of 'Wolf Warrior' diplomacy is to promote the superiority of the PRC's governance model over existing democratic forms.<sup>38</sup> The PRC's diplomats use international social media platforms as a tool to amplify these assertive messages, and counter American, British and European media narratives on the platforms used by international audiences. During the Covid-19 crisis, for example, a Chinese diplomat published a social media post claiming that French nurses had allowed their nursing

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<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>34</sup> Hannah Bailey, 'Peaceful World Leadership or Nationalist Advocate? How China Uses Social Media to Project its Stance on Russia's Invasion of Ukraine', *Case Western Reserve Law Review*, unpublished.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>37</sup> Zhanna Malekos Smith, 'New Tail for China's "Wolf Warrior" Diplomats', *Centre for Strategic and International Studies*, 13/11/2021, <http://bit.ly/3YqIJTc> (checked: 07/03/2023).

<sup>38</sup> Zhao Alexandre Huang, "'Wolf Warrior' and China's digital public diplomacy during the COVID-19 crisis', *Place Branding and Public Diplomacy*, 18:1 (2022).



home patients to starve.<sup>39</sup> In a similar incident, Gui Congyou, the Chinese Ambassador to Sweden, was summoned to the Swedish Foreign Ministry to discuss comments made to the Swedish media. Discussing Sweden's relations to the PRC, he compared the behaviour of the Swedish media towards the PRC to a lightweight boxer provoking a fight with a heavyweight.<sup>40</sup>

This confrontational style of online diplomacy has received significant attention from online audiences, media and politicians in targeted countries. Between June 2020 and February 2021, the PRC's diplomats tweeted over 200,000 times, in turn generating over one million comments and 1.3 million retweets.<sup>41</sup> It is not clear whether this diplomatic strategy has had the desired effect of promoting the PRC's governance model. In early 2022 there were signs that the CCP's diplomatic efforts were moving away from the 'Wolf Warrior' approach and toward a more measured strategy. In May 2022, Wu Hongbo, a PRC Special Representative for European Affairs, stated that the PRC had made 'mistakes' with Wolf Warrior diplomacy and maintained that officials were aware that 'they have gone too far'.<sup>42</sup>

## Inauthentic accounts

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The PRC's state-backed media outlets and diplomats represent the official presence of the party-state on international social media. But they are not the only tool used to add narratives into the international discourse environment. Just as the CCP does domestically, it uses inauthentic accounts to flood international social media platforms with favourable messaging.

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<sup>39</sup> Interview accordée par l'Ambassadeur LU Shaye au magazine Challenges [Interview granted by Ambassador LU Shaye to Challenges magazine], Ambassade de la République populaire de Chine en République française [Embassy of the People's Republic of China to the Republic of France], 03/12/2022, <https://bit.ly/3uIhSp> (checked: 07/03/2023).

<sup>40</sup> Jari Tanner, 'Sweden summons Chinese envoy over "lightweight boxer" remark', *The Seattle Times*, 18/01/2020, <https://bit.ly/3YgCdOv> (checked: 07/03/2023).

<sup>41</sup> Marcel Schliebs, Hannah Bailey, Jonathan Bright and Philip N. Howard, 'China's public diplomacy operations: understanding engagement and inauthentic amplifications of PRC diplomats on Facebook and Twitter', Oxford University: Programme on Democracy and Technology, 11/05/2021, <https://bit.ly/3hplGr> (checked: 07/03/2023). It is important to note that these figures are likely artificially inflated by inauthentic accounts, see: *Ibid.*

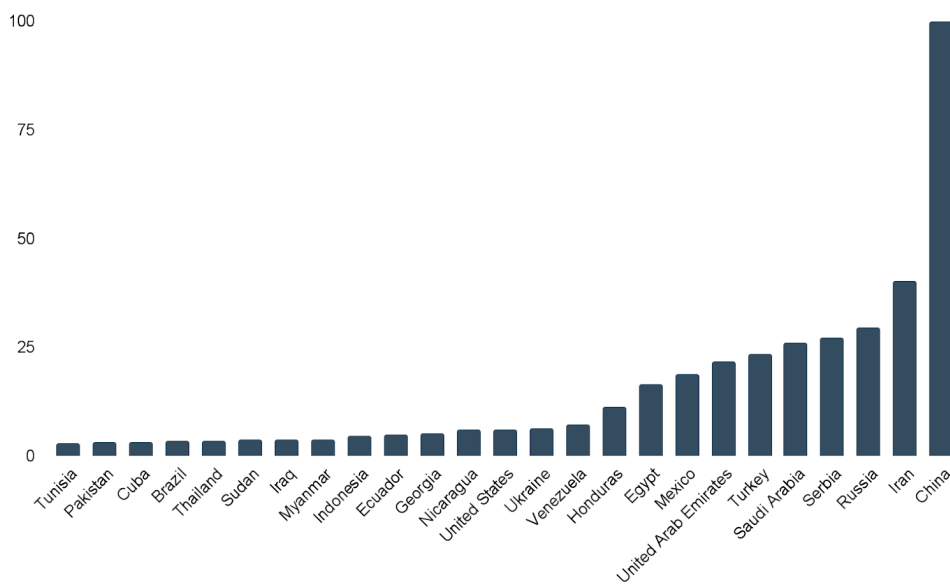
<sup>42</sup> Ray Weichieh Wang, 'China's Wolf Warrior Diplomacy Is Fading', *The Diplomat*, 27/07/2022, <http://bit.ly/3xSSTQp> (checked: 07/03/2023). Of course, the CCP's reappraisal of the benefits of Wolf Warrior diplomacy is distinct from other behaviours, such as the behaviour of the PRC's consulate officials in Manchester, UK, in October 2022. See: Tiffany May, 'Protester Is Dragged Into a Chinese Consulate in England and Beaten', *The New York Times*, 17/11/2022, <http://bit.ly/41r18AA> (checked: 07/03/2023).

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### How large are the CCP’s networks of inauthentic accounts?

Graph 3 illustrates the scale of the CCP’s networks of inauthentic accounts relative to those used by other countries. This graph plots a normalised index of the number of inauthentic accounts operated from within particular countries on Facebook, Instagram and Twitter. Graph 3 plots the twenty-five countries with the largest networks of accounts, and from this graph we can see that the PRC is the dominant instigator of information operations amongst them. The PRC, for example, accounts for more than twice the number of inauthentic accounts than the second ranked country, Iran, and over three times the amount as Russia, the third ranked country.

**Graph 3: Top 25 Countries Instigating Information Operations on Facebook, Instagram and Twitter Between 2017 – 2021<sup>43</sup>**



Note: Country-level data are normalised using min-max normalisation between 0-100.

<sup>43</sup> The data for this graph was collected from Twitter and Meta’s ‘information operation’ reports. See: ‘Coordinated Inauthentic Behaviour,’ Meta, No date, <http://bit.ly/3m27LcC> (checked: 07/03/2023) and ‘Twitter Moderation Research Consortium’, Twitter, No date, <http://bit.ly/3ISIsTk> (checked: 07/03/2023). The data constitutes the total number of manipulative accounts responsible for instigating information operations on Facebook, Instagram and Twitter for every country in the world. A min-max normalisation is used to scale the data between 0 and 100, with 0 indicating the lowest number of manipulative accounts, and 100 the highest. Empirically, several countries are tied with a score of zero, while only one (the PRC) acquires a score of 100. Every other country is then rescaled accordingly to a corresponding value between 0 and 100. The twenty-five highest scoring countries are included in Graph 3.

Between 2017 and 2021, Twitter removed 31,151 ‘core’ inauthentic accounts originating from the PRC, and a further 150,000 accounts that were used to amplify content of these accounts.<sup>44</sup> Note that only the ‘core’ network of inauthentic accounts are included in Graph 3. These ‘core’ accounts were responsible for spreading a variety of narratives, such as those promoting the physical assault of activists in Hong Kong protesting against Beijing’s erosion of the city’s freedoms, those praising the PRC’s response to Covid-19, and those criticising Taiwan’s response to the virus.<sup>45</sup>

### *How effective are these networks?*

While these networks of inauthentic accounts may be large in size, this does not necessarily mean that they have a notable impact on public discourse. For example, in the case of one network of 23,750 inauthentic Twitter accounts removed in 2020, most had fewer than 10 followers, suggesting that their content failed to reach many real users on the platform.<sup>46</sup> A separate investigation into a Twitter network of inauthentic accounts amplifying Liu Xiaoming, then PRC Ambassador to the United Kingdom (UK), found that while this network was responsible for 44% of his retweets and 20% of his replies, it received low levels of engagement among real users.<sup>47</sup>

It appears that the impact networks of inauthentic accounts operated on behalf of the CCP on international social media platforms have on wider online discourse is limited. However, it is important to consider the wider goals these networks may serve. First, manipulating user engagement metrics can cause the social media algorithm to recommend the content to authentic users. Second, the ambassador or official responsible for operating the account being amplified may receive promotions or an improvement in status as a result of higher engagement levels which indicate support among international audiences. Finally, it is important to note that the impact of inauthentic networks that may still be in operation and evading detection is unknown.

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<sup>44</sup> Twitter Safety, ‘Disclosing networks of state-linked information operations we’ve removed’, *Twitter Blog*, 12/06/2020, <https://bit.ly/3FflvGK> (checked: 07/03/2023).

<sup>45</sup> Carly Miller et. al, ‘Sockpuppets Spin COVID Yarns: An Analysis of PRC-Attributed June 2020 Twitter takedown’, Stanford University, 18/06/2021, <http://bit.ly/3ISgVkk> (checked: 07/03/2023), p. 25.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>47</sup> Marcel Schliebs, Hannah Bailey, Jonathan Bright and Philip N. Howard, ‘China’s Inauthentic UK Twitter Diplomacy: A Coordinated Network Amplifying PRC Diplomats’, Oxford University: Programme on Democracy and Technology, 11/05/2021, <https://bit.ly/3BumzW5> (checked: 07/03/2023).

## What can governments, social media platforms and regulatory bodies do to limit the impact of Chinese operations?

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It is clear that the CCP engages in discursive statecraft operations on international social media platforms to shape discourse in favour of the PRC while undermining its rivals. Although such operations come in many different forms and with a high volume of online activity, their effectiveness is ultimately limited, and social media platforms actively combat them. Nonetheless, given the potential implications of the CCP's discursive statecraft on the global information environment, this topic still warrants close attention from the international community and His Majesty's Government. As such, there are a variety of actions that governments, social media platforms and regulatory bodies can take to detect and limit the impact of PRC discursive statecraft when practised online:

1. Regularly liaise with journalists, civil rights groups and academics working on discursive operations to create streamlined processes for reporting suspected inauthentic networks.
2. Collaborate with social media companies to automate the detection of state-backed inauthentic networks. Easier access to data from social media companies would allow researchers to train AI tools to automate network detection.
3. Continue the process of labelling state-backed social media accounts on international social media platforms. These labels have a 'priming' effect on genuine users that minimises the impact of the narratives spread by these accounts.<sup>48</sup>
4. Intervene to remove state-backed media accounts when the content they are producing is unambiguously problematic. Russian state-backed media outlets were removed from international social media platforms following Russia's full-scale war against Ukraine. Governments and social media companies should take similar actions if the PRC's state-backed media outlets spread problematic narratives.

These actions should allow social media companies to better identify and

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<sup>48</sup> Jack Nassetta and Kimberley Gross, 'State media warning labels can counteract the effects of foreign disinformation', *Harvard Kennedy School Misinformation Review*, 1 (2020).



remove destructive state-backed accounts, and make their users more aware of the origins of the narratives they consume. Together, these efforts should blunt the PRC's ability to reshape and redefine international discourse.

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### About the author

**Hannah Bailey** is a PhD candidate at the Oxford Internet Institute and a researcher at the Programme on Democracy and Technology. Her research uses machine learning and natural language processing methods to explore how authoritarian regimes strategically manipulate narratives. Specifically, she focuses on the case of China. She holds a BSc in Politics and Philosophy from the London School of Economics, as well as two MScs, in Contemporary Chinese Studies, and in the Social Science of the Internet, both from Oxford University.

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