

# Restructuring Information Warfare in the United States

## Shaping the Narrative of the Future

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### Introduction

On 31 December 2019, the People's Republic of China (PRC) verified to the World Health Organization (WHO) that pneumonia of an unknown cause was

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reported in Wuhan, China. This virus would later be known as COVID-19.<sup>1</sup> On 10 January 2020, the PRC reported its first COVID-19 casualty. Two days later, the virus made its first appearance outside of mainland China and on 21 January 2020, the US announced its first COVID-19 case.<sup>2</sup> In an attempt to downplay the dangers of the virus, deflect blame, and ultimately protect its interests, the PRC waged a complex, multifaceted information warfare (IW) campaign.<sup>3</sup> The PRC intentionally suppressed information to the public from its health experts, carefully crafted narratives across all media platforms that: 1) favorably highlighted its response to the virus, 2) blamed the US in the spread of the virus, and 3) compared the virus to the common flu.

Although not as easily observed and understood as physical warfare, the effects of this IW campaign are equally devastating. The confusion created by this campaign caused the world to delay recognizing the seriousness of the pandemic, created doubts and uncertainty regarding the best way to handle the virus, and enabled its rapid spread. This confusion contributed to the US losing more lives to the virus than the Vietnam War and all subsequent armed conflicts in which the country has been involved.<sup>4</sup>

The United States government (USG) has long recognized the need to increase its ability to operate in the information environment (IE).<sup>5</sup> Although some progress has been made, the US remains woefully unprepared to combat complex IW campaigns such as the one waged by the PRC. This inability has harmed US interests and increased the economic cost and total lives lost. The US must quickly close the strategic gap in its ability to operate in the IE and counter adversary IW campaigns by developing a whole-of-government organization similar in scope to the defunct US Information Agency (USIA)—directly linked and colocated with fully resourced and empowered Department of Defense and Department of State counterparts.

### **PRC's Information Warfare Campaign**

In line with the PRC's unrestricted warfare doctrine, some analysts have argued that once confirmed that their economy would be negatively affected by COVID-19, its "strategic competitiveness moving forward was critically dependent that the economies of its strategic rivals should also be forced into decline." In an analysis, the PRC's IW campaign appeared to be geared toward protecting PRC investments and increasing the cost of COVID-19 for its strategic rivals.<sup>6</sup>

Initially, the PRC focused on two main efforts: suppressing information and creating misinformation. The PRC suppressed potentially damaging information that it perceived as endangering its worldwide investments. Simultaneously, through the use of social media and strategic messaging, they rapidly disseminated

false information in an attempt to highlight its ability to deal with the pandemic, deflect blame regarding the cause of the pandemic, and create an overall sense of confusion about the virus to protect itself and its investments across the world.

### **Suppressing Information—How the Virus Spreads**

Evidence shows that the virus was spreading via human-to-human transmission as early as 1 December 2019.<sup>7</sup> On 27 December 2019, Dr. Zhang Jixian reported a family cluster of cases to her superiors, indicating the virus was spreading via person-to-person.<sup>8</sup> On 30 December 2019, Dr. Ai Fen reported an unknown respiratory virus to her superiors.<sup>9</sup> Instead of acting on the information, her superiors reprimanded her. She recounted the admonishment in an essay titled, “The One Who Supplied the Whistle,” published in *China’s People (Renwu)* magazine. Following publication, the article was deleted from Chinese social media sites, removed from *Renwu* magazine, and Dr. Ai was reported missing.<sup>10</sup> Despite the PRC’s attempt to suppress the article, Chinese citizens found creative ways to avoid the PRC’s censorship. Writing the article backward, inserting intentional typos and emojis, and sharing the article in fictional languages such as Klingon, allowed the article to spread through various platforms.<sup>11</sup>

Similar to Dr. Ai Fen, Dr. Li Wenliang warned his colleagues and publicly shared his findings about a possible outbreak of a highly infectious respiratory disease.<sup>12</sup> On 2 January 2020, Wuhan police, governed by the PRC’s Ministry of Public Security, summoned Dr. Li and his colleagues and threatened to detain them for “making false comments on the Internet.”<sup>13</sup>

With the success of the PRC’s suppression efforts, Wuhan, with more than 11 million people and 800,000 tourists per year, continued to operate as usual through a Chinese Communist Party conference held on January 12–15 with authorities claiming zero new cases in this period. The PRC would not confirm human-to-human transmission of the virus until 22 January 2020.<sup>14</sup>

With little contrary evidence to show otherwise, due in part to the PRC suppressing information, the WHO announced on 14 January 2020 that “preliminary investigations conducted by the PRC found no clear evidence of human-to-human transmission of the novel coronavirus (COVID-19) identified in Wuhan, China.”<sup>15</sup> Had the WHO known that in early December, multiple Chinese doctors had reported patients with COVID-19 like symptoms—with no exposure to the South China seafood market—they may have issued alternative guidance.<sup>16</sup>

## **Suppressing Information-Number of Cases in China**

Although the PRC has since conceded the virus has a high likelihood of spreading via human-to-human transmission, it continued to suppress the number of COVID-19 deaths across China. As of 8 October 2020, officials in China reported 91,252 citizens had tested positive for COVID-19, and 4,634 had died from the virus; meanwhile, New York City reported 473,000 people had tested positive, with more than 32,850 dying from the virus.<sup>17</sup> Given the population size and density of China (1.4 billion) and New York City (8.4 million), it seemed improbable that the entire country of China would have only one-seventh the deaths of New York City.

Despite the PRC's attempt to control that narrative, the international community began to openly criticize China and doubt the validity of the data released. Reports of trucks delivering thousands of urns per day in Wuhan, crematoriums unable to keep up with the demand necessary to discard the bodies, and Wuhan citizens speaking up against the PRC's claim of a low mortality rate contributed evidence to counter their claims and helped expose the PRC's IW campaign.<sup>18</sup>

With increased pressure from the international community and domestic activists on 17 April 2020, the PRC revised its total number of COVID-19 cases by increasing its death toll exactly 50 percent and adding 1,290 fatalities.<sup>19</sup>

## **Creating Disinformation**

As analysis demonstrates above, the PRC began their disinformation campaign by minimizing the virus's risk of spreading via human-to-human transmission. They would later evolve their disinformation campaign by minimizing the virus's effects and later blaming the US for the pandemic.

## **The "It's Just a Flu" Narrative**

The "it's just a flu" narrative can be traced back to early January when social media posts surfaced to downplay the seriousness of this new threat by relating it to seasonal influenza and emphasizing that the traditional flu is deadlier than COVID-19.<sup>20</sup> First emerging via *Twitter* posts, the narrative was subsequently picked up and propagated widely via bot-like behavior. Although these accounts cannot be traced to any specific adversaries, they follow similar tactics employed by past PRC IW campaigns.<sup>21</sup> Chinese state media outlets ran pieces discussing the current US flu season during this time, portraying it as a parallel and comparable epidemic. Foreign Ministry officials exploited these stories by citing US seasonal flu numbers to counter criticism over the PRC's handling of the situation. They would later downplay the coronavirus as the flu by propagating mis-

leading statistics that encouraged people to make false comparisons between COVID-19 and the H1N1 outbreak; to this day, this narrative continues to be supported and propagated across the US.<sup>22</sup>

### **US Biological Weapon Narrative**

On 23 February 2020, a PRC official state newspaper reprinted an article associating the US seasonal influenza deaths with the novel coronavirus, causing speculation that COVID-19 originated in the US. Additionally, the PRC amplified these articles and social media posts alleging the virus was a result of the USG.<sup>23</sup>

On 27 February 2020, a Chinese doctor, Zhong Nanshan, stated that the virus “may not have originated in China.” Soon after, numerous Chinese politicians began what appeared to be a coordinated information campaign to spread this narrative.<sup>24</sup> On 8 March 2020, the Chinese ambassador to South Africa tweeted that, “Although the epidemic first broke out in China, it did not necessarily mean that the virus originated from China, let alone ‘made in China’”<sup>25</sup> South Africa is a key member of China’s Belt and Road initiative; it was in China’s best interest to shift blame to the US to ensure that its investments worldwide and in South Africa were protected. On 8 April 2020, South Africa’s President Cyril Ramaphosa expressed “gratitude to China for its long-term support to South Africa and African countries,” a significant indicator of a successful campaign.<sup>26</sup>

Along with traditional media, social media sites like *Facebook*, *Twitter*, and *YouTube* saw growth in posts asserting that the virus may have been a funded US biological weapon. *Google Trends* analysis also indicates that these narratives were highly prevalent with individuals worldwide searching whether the virus was a result of US malfeasance—an indication of the success of this disinformation campaign.<sup>27</sup>

The PRC spread and amplified multiple disinformation narratives across multiple platforms, continuing to cause widespread confusion in the IE. The successful suppression campaign conducted by the PRC deprived the WHO and other world leaders of vital evidence. The WHO would later claim that the spread of false information resulted in an “infodemic” with people across the globe unable to find reliable information surrounding COVID-19.<sup>28</sup> Despite numerous efforts from information companies, US officials, and health experts, conspiracy theories and ineffective preventative measures continue to flood the IE and discredit the USG’s response to the pandemic.<sup>29</sup>

### **Structural Challenges to Countering Global IW Campaigns**

The inability to quickly identify the PRC’s IW campaign and mount an effective response highlights the US’s inability to combat complex, multifaceted IW

campaigns. This inability centers on the fact that US IW capabilities are spread across numerous entities, and there are no sufficient structures in place from which the US can conduct a whole-of-government response. Other USG instruments of national power have a lead in coordinating its use (State Department for Diplomatic, the Department of Defense for Military, and—for simplicity of argument—the Department of Treasury for Economic). However, the US has no lead agency to organize, coordinate, synchronize, and, most importantly, task other government entities to employ information as an instrument of national power.

While there are different organizations across multiple USG agencies capable of employing information as an instrument of national power, the lack of a centralized and coordinated IW response results in a dispersed capability with individual organizations lacking the resources or authorities to effectively engage and protect US interests. When organizations do engage, there is a lack of a synchronized and cohesive narrative. These limitations leave the US unable to provide a real-time, whole-of-government approach to address adversary IW campaigns or actively shape the IE during times of heightened competition.<sup>30</sup> To highlight this point, we explore several of the main USG agencies that operate in the IE.

### **US Agency for Global Media**

Countering IW was not a new need for the US. The Cold War was rife with Soviet attempts to control the IE.<sup>31</sup> To counter that challenge, the USIA was created in 1953.<sup>32</sup> At the height of the Cold War, the USIA had an annual operational budget of \$2 billion and employed a professional staff of over 10,000 spread across 150 countries; it also had the authority to protect US interests in the IE. Following the Cold War, the USIA was disbanded, and its broadcasting functions were consolidated under an independent entity known as the US Agency for Global Media (USAGM).<sup>33</sup>

With a drastic cut in resources and mission, the USAGM now serves as the governing body for all nonmilitary US broadcasting, providing programming in 56 languages. The USAGM mission is to inform, engage, and connect people worldwide in support of freedom and democracy. However, unlike its predecessor, the USAGM lacks the authority, and is not chartered, funded or equipped to conduct broad operations in the IE to counter adversarial propaganda and misinformation. Although USAGM is one of the most globally aligned US organizations available to counter IW campaigns, it is under-resourced and does not possess the requisite authorities to do so.<sup>34</sup>

## **Department of Defense**

The DOD has IW capabilities at various levels within its force. Most reside inside the force structure of geographic and functional combatant commands (CCMD) and are tasked through unified combatant command (COCOM) authority, the nontransferable authority to command, and task assigned forces to accomplish missions.<sup>35</sup> Due to the sensitive nature and strategic implication of some of these capabilities, authorities to utilize IW capabilities are often retained by the Secretary of Defense (SECDEF) or president of the United States (PO-TUS). This structure creates a myriad of capabilities and authorities residing in geographic CCMDs such as the United States Indo-Pacific Command, and in functional combatant commands such as United States Cyber Command (US-CYBERCOM). Although the DOD utilizes the concept of supported and supporting commands to clarify the relationship between commands engaging in the same conflict, there are few distinct geographic or functional lines in IW, making the designation of supported and supporting commands problematic.<sup>36</sup> The Joint Information Operations Warfare Center (JIOWC) is the DOD's only strategic-level IW entity not aligned to a command. Reporting directly to the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, it is uniquely situated to enable the DOD's information power across the globe. However, under the CJCS, it does not have COCOM authority and has no tasking authority over those who do.

Further complicating the DOD employment of IW capabilities is the fact that “many of our defense establishment processes presuppose clearly defined states of peace and war.”<sup>37</sup> To limit US war-fighting advantages, adversaries utilize IW to compete in a manner that seeks to avoid triggering open conflict.<sup>38</sup> When no area of active hostilities has been designated, DOD IW capabilities to compete with adversaries below the armed conflict level are often bogged down with a complex approval process. By the time approvals are granted, the IE has evolved, and the opportunity to shape and influence the IE has often been missed.

## **Department of State**

The Department of State (DOS) has multiple capabilities to conduct operations in the IE—most are nested under the chief of mission (COM) in a given country. The authority to execute operations in the IE (OIE) occurs under the COM.<sup>39</sup> With COM authorities designated by country, the authority to utilize DOS IW capabilities when the threat expands geopolitical boundaries is complex and time-consuming.

The DOS also has a global IW organization, the Global Engagement Center (GEC). The GEC is tasked to “lead, synchronize, and coordinate efforts of the

Federal Government to recognize, understand, expose, and counter foreign state and non-state propaganda and disinformation efforts aimed at undermining U.S. security interests.”<sup>40</sup>

The GEC’s global nature makes it uniquely situated among DOS entities to identify IW campaigns similar to one the PRC is currently waging. Although the GEC enjoys a broad charter in the OIE of a given country, tension often comes between COM country-specific authorities and GEC’s global charter. What is best for the global or regional operation may counter a COM’s given mission and vision. As currently organized, the GEC has not been given broad authorities to conduct OIE but has instead been relegated to “as needed, *support* the development and dissemination of fact-based narratives and analysis to counter propaganda and disinformation directed at the United States.”<sup>41</sup> Also, despite having an essential global tasking, the GEC has historically been under-resourced and under-utilized.

### **Recommendation**

The USG structure analysis related to IW concluded that the USAGM, DOD, and DOS do not, individually, have the resources or authorities to adequately compete in the IE. These organizations and departments independently provide the US capabilities; however, structural, geographical, functional, or legal limitations leave the USG response disjointed, unsynchronized, and ineffective against complex, multifaceted global IW campaigns.

For the US to compete in the IE, it requires a whole-of-government approach to rapidly mobilize resources and capabilities to reduce the spread of disinformation and counter adversary tactics that endanger US citizens, such as the one which was conducted by the PRC. Our recommendation is to create an independent, whole-of-government organization reporting directly to the National Security Council that will be empowered and resourced to lead, synchronize, and task IW capabilities to defend and protect US interests. This organization should be similar in scope to the defunct USIA, which existed from 1953–99, to counter Soviet messaging. An effort of this magnitude or greater is required for the US to compete successfully with China, Russia, Iran, and other potential competitors in the IE.

The inability to counter a complex IW campaign will not be the fault of any of these organizations or departments. As briefly outlined in the IE analysis, the US inability to respond to IW has been viewed as an organizational structure problem. The lack of a single, fully resourced government function has left the US with fragmented, under-resourced, and under-authorized entities doing the best they can against well organized and equipped adversaries. Unfortunately, numerous IW



campaigns against the US and its citizens, such as the one highlighted above, confirms that the US approach results in delayed, disorganized responses and missed opportunities to counter complex IW campaigns and favorably shape the IE.

A whole-of-government organization, built to compete in today's IE, should be empowered to lead, synchronize, and coordinate USG diverse and previously separated IW capabilities across the conflict continuum to protect the US, its interests, and allies. The broadcasting capabilities of the USAGM should be fully absorbed into the new organization, and the USAGM dissolved. The GEC could serve as a core of this new organization and represent the DOS in this whole-of-government approach. The JIOWC, or a similar DOD organization, should be colocated with this new organization to enhance effective coordination, synchronization and to ensure DOD support is available when needed.

Furthermore, this new organization should be granted additional chief of information warfare authorities. These authorities should include the ability to task disparate IW capabilities resident in other government entities to support the US in defense of broad IW campaigns that do not neatly fit within the scope of COM or COCOM authority.

We also recommend the DOD internally restructure to optimize for IW. Much of this restructuring is already underway with joint concepts such as the Joint Concept for Integrated Campaigning and the Joint Concept for Operations in the Information Environment guiding the way. The component efforts must be supplemented by a larger, more strategic reorganization that allows for a whole of DOD approach to be nested within the whole-of-government approach.

One of the challenges of the DOD's current approach of placing war-fighting authorities under COCOM authorities is limiting authority by geographic location or war-fighting function. IW is neither geographically nor functionally limited. Under the current structure, the geographic CCMDs are perhaps best aligned to compete in the IE's physical dimensions, USCYBERCOM to operate in the information dimension, and United States Special Operations Command has the expertise and capabilities to operate in the cognitive dimension. These dimensions' interrelated nature will always create confusion where one CCMD's COCOM authority begins, and another's authority ends when competing and waging conflict in the IE. Although the concepts of supported and supporting help clarify roles and responsibilities in war fighting, giving primacy to one CCMD in the IW fight would unintentionally place geographic or functional limitations on the US ability to respond.<sup>42</sup>

One approach to solving this dilemma would be to pull the JIOWC up from its current location under the CJCS or stand-up a new, similar organization and place it under the direct authority of the SECDEF. With the IE as its sole con-

centration, this entity laser-focus on understanding the global IE, recognizing IW campaigns and SECDEF tasking authorities tasking DOD IW capabilities when required. In IW campaigns where a more focused functional or geographical approach is better suited, this entity could support CCMDs operating under existing authorities by advocating for higher-level authorities from the POTUS or SECDEF when needed. In comparison to a CCMD, the smaller size of this organization would also allow it to colocate with the rest of the whole-of-government IW organization to ensure appropriate coordination. Each functional and geographic combatant command, and each service component, could also supply IW liaisons to this organization and ensure efforts were coordinated, command interests were met, and that OIE are synchronized, coordinated, and deconflicted with other CCMD operations and activities the services undertake.

This whole-of-government organization, staffed with experts from independent USG organizations, the DOS, and the DOD, would become the US OIE's epicenter. This organization would provide the US the capability to counter complex IW campaigns, to proactively shape the IE, and protect its citizens and interests across the world.

## **Conclusion**

Our adversaries are waging IW against US citizens—their efforts are complex, widespread, and effective. The PRC's uncontested ability to maneuver in the IE increased the challenge of combating COVID-19. In the early stages of the pandemic, the PRC sowed confusion regarding the nature of the virus, attempted to promote their own response while discrediting the response of its competitors, and blamed the US to reduce the negative effects to their global reputation. The cost of these actions is a contributing factor to the US losing more lives to the virus than the combined deaths of the Vietnam War and European theater in World War II, creating a risk of a deep economic recession and amplifying distrust between US leaders and its citizens.

If the proposed organization were in place before the COVID-19 outbreak, the USG could have more quickly identified the PRC's attempt to suppress information regarding the transmissibility of COVID-19. This information could have better informed the WHO and governments around the world regarding the severity of the virus, prompting earlier action. Additionally, this whole-of-government agency could have quickly leveraged interagency IW capabilities to engage in the fight earlier with greater impact than what occurred.

The proposed whole-of-government construct reinstitutes and resources an organization similar in scope to the USIA with various IW capabilities either falling under this organization or directly partnering with it. Such a structure,

empowered with the resources and authorities necessary to meet the scope of today's threats, could provide the US a better capability to counter complex IW campaigns, more proactively shape the IE, and better protect its citizens against adversaries waging IW. Most importantly, this structure would provide a central organization purposefully designed and equipped to use information as an instrument of national power, filling in a current gap of US capability.

The benefit from this organization is the development of the necessary expertise, depth of analysis, and continuity to take a long-term approach to shaping the IE—much like our adversaries are already doing. Additionally, this whole-of-government organization would make cross-department planning groups for OIE standard practice and ensure all capabilities across the USG are considered during planning and engagement activities. Finally, this organization, empowered with tasking authority, could simplify the complex authorization process, ensuring the right authorities are delegated to the right entity early enough in a campaign to bring the USG's full capabilities to action.

While COVID-19 was used as an example of IW, these tactics continue to be applied to shape the IE to support strategic objectives. Adversaries such as Russia and Iran have engaged in IW aimed at causing confusion, sowing distrust, and shifting blame in a variety of political, military, and economic situations. Even when the world recovers from COVID-19, the US will remain entrenched in great-power competition, and adversaries will continue to exploit the US inability to compete in the IE to further their strategic objectives. ★

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