War of Words: Understanding and Defending Against Chinese Disinformation Campaigns

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Abstract

China is slowly gripping the world in a self shaped rhetoric, one that favors China and diminishes the rest. The methodical expansions of these influence capabilities raises alarms, they gain more control everyday, and current defenses are not adequate to combat this control. China's influence control is broadly explained in three parts; internal information control, external information control, and internal behavior control.

These efforts start with internal information control, the Great Firewall of China. This mechanism controls what one can see and hear inside China by controlling internet content. China does not allow foreign companies or websites to operate inside its borders unless they abide by strict censorship and data ownership rules.

Next, external information control. China can not control the internet outside its walls as it does on the inside, so they adapted their tactics and created "internet commentators" (50 Cent Army). They created jobs that pay 50 cents for every online post that creates divides or boosts China's rhetoric. These posts are targeted for specific tasks, specific regions, and are relentless assaults of disinformation that aim to promote disdain, distrust, and discourse in a society.

Finally, internal behavior control. China controls what people hear and see inside and outside of their country; however, people still post negative comments about the government, and behave in a ways that threaten the government. China quickly implemented a monitoring system, the Social Credit System (SCS), watching and reporting every action of its citizens. This system is still in the early stages but is growing rapidly. If this system becomes country wide, the control China will have on its people, on their actions, on their information, becomes that more concrete. Immediate actions must be taken to combat and defend against these efforts, or China's control on information and behavior will slowly spread worldwide without recourse.

Internal Information Control: Great Firewall of China

China first implemented its internet system in 1994, in an effort to establish and support a "socialist market economy". As the internet grew in scope, it became a common platform for communication and information sharing. This shift created ways for government opposition to organize and coordinate, namely the Chinese Democratic Party (CDP). In 1998, the Great Firewall of China (GFW) was developed, a system marketed as a protective barrier for potential damage to the country, the government, and the people. However, it is widely known that control of information has been central to the CCPs strategy since it first came to power[1], and this system was a way for the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) to secure its position by silencing the CDP[2] and imposing an iron grip on information.

The GFW was a success and the CCP continued to grow the system; adding additional monitoring equipment, blocking foreign information tools (Google, Facebook, Twitter, Wikipedia), and requiring all companies to abide by the strict domestic censorship rules and regulations. In essence, the CCP developed the ability to fully control what its population can see and hear online, controlling the minds of its people and promoting its own internal propaganda with no recourse for the population.

External Information Control: 50 Cent Army

The CCP secured the internal flow of information however, its citizens were still getting conflicting information when outside of the country which was threatening the CCPs control. They decided to start focusing on external information control, and implemented "internet commentators". Started in 2004 with the idea of countering any undesirable online information with CCP viewpoints, "internet commentators" quickly turned into an international information weapon. The CCP started forming groups of "commentators" all around the country, calling for

those with good political quality. Official training was developed, directives were drafted, and compensation was established (50 cents per post).

These "internet commentators" (50 Cent Party) became highly active in internal and external online discussions, with one Harvard study estimating over 488 million social media posts per year[3]. The directives of these groups are simple; criticize America, undermine Democracy, downplay the existence of Taiwan, and promote the CCP and patriotic emotions [4]. The power of the 50 Cent Party to direct public discussion is highly effective, confusing worldwide populations and making it difficult to determine if information is real or malicious. The effects of this control can be seen in every aspect of life, in countries all over the world, the CCP is creating deep divides and discourse in countries that do not conform to its ideals.

Internal Behavior Control: Social Credit System

Now that the CCP has control over both internal and external flow of information, it is moving to the next step in ultimate control; behavior control, enter the Social Credit System (SCS). A system first widely implemented in 2017 in cities labeled as "models" of the CCP, pitched as a system that establishes a sincerity culture, and promotes honesty and traditional virtues[5]. The SCS operates via a network of monitoring systems; internet, cameras, and phones. These systems track citizens, use AI and facial recognition to identify any acts deemed harmful to the government or society. The CCP framed the system as a set of mechanisms providing rewards or punishments as feedback to actors, based not just on the lawfulness, but also the morality of their actions, covering economic, social and political conduct[6]. For instance, talking bad about the CCP results in negative points, while promoting the CCP results in positive points. The higher a score the more social benefits society provides. Particularly, if you have a low score you are banned from flights and only allowed slow internet speeds, while a higher score gets

express service at hospitals and large discounts on services[7]. Looking closely, this system is designed to strengthen internal pro-CCP control and promote propaganda through rewards. Giving its citizens no choice, no freedoms, either promote the CCP or struggle to live a normal life in the absence of all social benefits.

Understanding Disinformation

It is clear, in the modern age, control over information is key to sustained power and China has a leading edge. However, analyzing specifically at how China implemented this control is very fragile, leaving open many vulnerabilities, and avenues to cut down the dragon and return control to the people. For instance, the internal control created by the GFW of China promotes their version of social stability, but this limits economical development by stopping information flow and the critical thinking needed to innovate. Without economic development a country's growth and influence is stagnant.

Next, looking at China's external control, the 50 Cent Army. This tactic works well on silencing rhetoric against the CCP and amplifying that against America and Democracy; however it is causing a major rift in the internet. This tactic is threatening free speech and reducing the credibility of the internet, a main source of China's economic development and growth.

Lastly, the SCS of China. The ultimate internal behavior control, a country wide system to reward and punish citizens based on their actions. A system well positioned to instill propaganda into everyday lives of its population. The idea that the CCP is always watching and always ranking its citizens, the ones who do as they are told get preferential treatment in all aspects of life. Once again, China has created another system that stops free speech, and is trying to stop the free will of its people. This system threatens freedoms, by eliminating privacy, and

instilling fear into everyday life. China is creating the ultimate control over its country but in doing so is creating huge vulnerabilities in their economy and population, vulnerabilities that will eventually divide their country.

Defending Against Disinformation

History has shown an effective method of defending against disinformation and protecting its population and its country. During Taiwan's 2020 presidential elections, China launched a disinformation and propaganda campaign aimed at electing a pro-China president. Taiwan was able to defend its country and defeat the CCP campaign with a "whole-of-society" approach[8]. This approach was highly effective, it empowered its people by detecting, blocking, and debunking fake news leading to a fair and honest election. These lessons should be applied in every country with haste, with the rise of disinformation campaigns it is crucial that the US implement a "whole-of-society" approach to protect and defend its population, the country, and the foundation of Democracy. The recommended approach to defend against disinformation;

    1. Establish a separate organization to combat disinformation

    2. Log all known entities that are attacking the US

    3. Track all instances of known disinformation campaigns in the US

    4. Educate the population on current disinformation campaigns

    4. Block all confirmed foreign disinformation organizations, actors, and individuals

    5. Debunk all confirmed cases with relevant informed information

This is a matter of time, which strategic competition falls victim to information control first, dividing internally and leaving only a shell of its former self behind.

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