



WEAPONISING THE FREE PRESS?

CHINA'S GLOBAL MEDIA OFFENSIVE



IFJ RESEARCH REPORT ON MEDIA AND CHINA 2019



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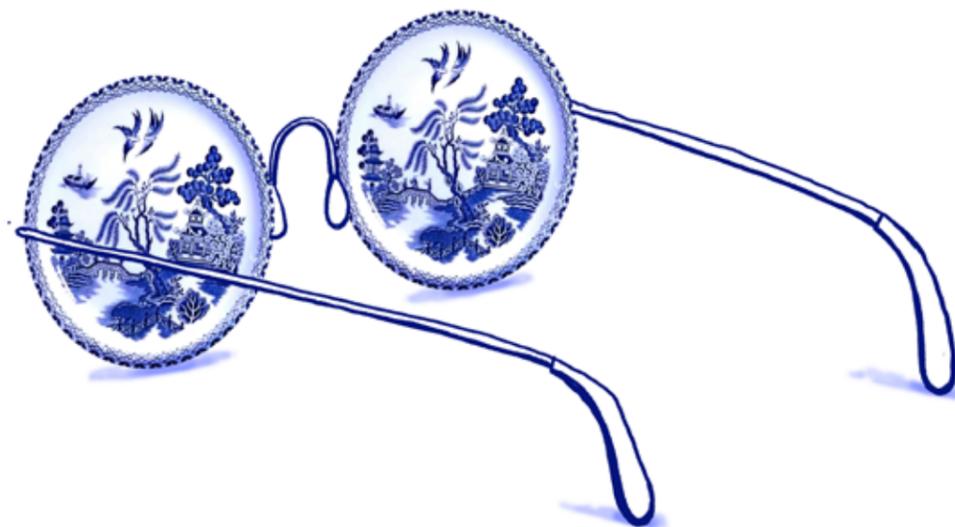
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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The **International Federation of Journalists (IFJ)** has a strong history of monitoring and reporting on China's media. Under its long-running China Press Freedom Program (2008-2019), the IFJ has documented and analysed the changing media space in China and its impact on media workers, media infrastructure, journalists' working conditions and freedom of expression.

This report looks beyond China's borders to more broadly examine China's rapidly evolving media influence in the world; on media operations, coverage of critical issues and journalists themselves.

This paper examines:

- China's broad strategy goals
- Building Chinese discourse power to challenge the West's "hegemonic media monopoly"
- Using 'borrowed boats' of Western media or a Trojan horse strategy to spread China's message 'Buying boats' or increasing Chinese acquisitions overseas
- Harnessing global digital disruption and technological advances for information warfare
- Exploiting the economic and political vulnerabilities of the free press internationally
- Driving a shift in journalism values globally ■



INTRODUCTION

China's international strategy is reshaping the entire global information environment as it expands the reach of its own state-run news outlets while acquiring stakes in international media companies.

Since 2009, Beijing has ramped up investment in news producers, news outlets and telecommunications infrastructure beyond its own borders, posing new challenges to freedom of expression and freedom of the press worldwide. At a time when independent media outlets are struggling with the collapse of traditional business models and shrinking ad revenues, the ability of China-backed outlets to buck market trends and invest heavily in new digital products tilts the playing field in their favour. The implications could be far-reaching, especially when combined with the impact of digital technologies on the way that consumers access the news.

For decades, Beijing's approach to shaping its image has been defensive, reactive and largely aimed at a domestic audience. The most visible manifestation of these efforts was the disappearance of content inside China: pages ripped from foreign magazines, or the BBC news flickering to black when it airs sensitive stories. Beijing's crude tools were domestic censorship, official complaints to news organisations' headquarters and expelling correspondents from China.

But since 2009, China has rolled out a more sophisticated and assertive strategy, reshaping the global information environment with massive infusions of money. Beijing is funding paid-for advertorials, sponsored journalistic coverage and providing free content to Western media outlets with the aim of producing a more positive information environment. While within China the press is increasingly tightly controlled, abroad Beijing has sought to exploit the vulnerabilities of the free press to its advantage, moving first to coopt Chinese-language media outlets overseas to "tell China's story well" in a unified voice.

Though Beijing's propaganda offensive is often shrugged off as clumsy and dull, this report underlines the granular nature and ambitious scale of its aggressive drive to redraw the global information order. This is an ideological and political struggle, with China determined to increase its "discourse power" to combat what it sees as decades of unchallenged western media imperialism. Beijing is also moving to silence critics overseas, sometimes through using state-run media as an attack dog. China's leaders regard the press as the "eyes, ears, tongue and throat" of the Communist party, and their idea of journalism depends upon a narrative discipline that precludes all but the party-approved version of events. For China, the media has become both

the battlefield on which this "global information war" is being waged, and the weapon of attack.

Beijing's easy access to economic resources have clear deleterious implications to global free speech. Through investment, Beijing-friendly owners are able to muzzle critical journalists and coopt independent news platforms. Through offers of free editorial content, news outlets are being transformed into amplifiers of party policy. Through intimidation of Chinese advertisers, sources of funding are being choked off for critical news outlets. These strategies have all been used to bring the Chinese-language media into line, for example in Australia where the once clamorous Chinese-language press is now almost entirely pro-Beijing, save a very small number of Falun Gong-affiliated outlets.

Now Beijing is turning its attention to media outlets that publish in English and local languages. These shifts in the media landscape are game-changing, and taking stock is a necessary step towards designing strategies to protect and strengthen journalists' rights. At a time when global journalism is facing unprecedented challenges, Beijing's encroachments far beyond its borders raise new fears about media concentration, and could undermine efforts to protect quality journalism. ■

STATE-RUN MEDIA EXPANSION

Global expansion “See the Difference”

CASE STUDY: China Global Television Network (CGTN) in London, had been scheduled to open in late 2019, in purpose-built headquarters at Chiswick Park. There were 6000 applications for 90 jobs, indicating how attractive such positions have become in this shrinking news market.

The tides of critical reporting that accompanied Beijing's 2008 Olympics prompted China to shift media strategy, spending USD 6.6 billion the following year strengthening its global media presence. China Global Television Network (CGTN) has expanded as the international arm of state-run China Central Television (CCTV), opening hubs in Washington, Kenya and London. CCTV now broadcasts in 140 countries.

CCTV has recruited respected non-Chinese faces, leveraging their credibility in foreign news markets and using their pulling power to attract audiences. Local news stars are lured in with good money and the chance to tell their country's story to a global audience. At a time of shrinking budgets, such offers are attractive. When CCTV launched its Washington headquarters in 2012, no fewer than five former or current BBC correspondents based in Latin America joined the broadcaster.

Intelligence tools, surveillance and internal reporting capabilities

CASE STUDY: Reporters for the Takungpao newspaper in Hong Kong infiltrated the campaign team of pro-democracy politician Lee Cheuk-yan, as well as physically attacking localist activist Edward Leung. The paper contravened electoral advertising laws by publishing electoral advertisements for a pro-Beijing candidate on the day of the 2018 Legco by-election.

The vanishingly thin line between China's journalism, propaganda work, influence projection and intelligence-gathering is of great concern. Chinese state media workers - including non-Chinese employees - sometimes gather information for confidential *neibu* reports not for publication, but solely for the eyes of senior officials. A recent Reuters report found at least 25 people

China has rolled out a more sophisticated and assertive strategy, reshaping the global information environment with massive infusions of money.



linked to anti-China and independence causes had received intense coverage - including covert photography - by state-media papers in Taiwan in the past three years. In this way, state media is used as a propaganda tool, a surveillance mechanism and an attack dog against those perceived as hostile.

WOONG FOREIGN-OWNED MEDIA

Cash incentives

CASE STUDY: China's struck 221 content partnerships with nominally-independent Chinese-language publication around the world allowing them to use state-run propaganda for free. The majority of these deals - 85 - were in Asia, with 51 in Japan alone.

Beijing's strategy to infuse CCP-approved messages into the existing media ecosystem is known as *jiechuanchuhai* or “borrowing a boat to reach the ocean”. This ‘borrowed boat’ approach, underwritten by Beijing's deep pockets, has effectively been rolled out

across global television, radio and print media, with one key target being overseas Chinese-language media. Beijing shares state-run propaganda for free with these outlets, whilst simultaneously choking off funding opportunities for platforms that host critical views by intimidating advertisers.

In Australia all but a tiny handful of more than fifty Chinese-language newspapers and magazines are now controlled by businessmen sympathetic to Beijing. The last remaining independent standouts are struggling to survive amid Beijing's hardline tactics. Chinese state security officers even camped for a fortnight in the Beijing offices of one advertiser at the independent Vision Times Media to intimidate him into withdrawing his business from the publication.

Sponsored inserts

CASE STUDY: The state-run English-language newspaper China Daily's China Watch supplement is carried by at least 30 newspapers around the world - including the New York

Times, the Wall Street Journal, the Washington Post and the UK Telegraph - reaching a combined audience of more than 16 million.

Beijing has exploited the financial vulnerabilities of the Western press by monetizing its advertising, striking deals with dozens of international publications to host pro-China content. Reports indicate The Daily Telegraph could be paid as much as £750,000 (USD 984,185) annually to carry the China Watch insert once a month. The world's most prestigious print mastheads have become ‘borrowed boats’ for Chinese propaganda, providing validation and legitimization to Chinese state-run messages.

Journalist trips to China

CASE STUDY: Australia-China Relations Institute (ACRI) has organised all-expenses paid tours for 28 high-profile Australian journalists to China over the past two years. These trips resulted from an MOU between ACRI and Xinhua, and are funded through in-kind support from the All China Journalists Association (ACJA), a Communist party body whose mission is to “tell China's stories well, spread China's voice”.

China is wooing journalists from around the world with all-expenses-paid tours. The hook: insider access in return for favourable coverage. Since 2009, the China-United States Exchange Foundation (Cusef), has taken 127 US journalists from 40 US outlets to China. For news outlets struggling with diminishing advertising revenues, these schemes effectively offer free China coverage delivered by their own correspondents, who gain valuable Chinese-language training, cultural knowhow and high-level contacts.

Journalist training in China

CASE STUDY: In 2018, China's all-expenses-paid foreign media fellowship brought 44 journalists from Asia and Africa to China for ten months, 17 of whom studied Masters' Degrees at Renmin University of China. One of this cohort, Filipino journalist Gregory Eugenio filed stories for the state-run Philippine News Agency whilst in China, then subsequently returned to his job writing for the communication team of Philippine president Rodrigo Duterte.

China is training scores of young

foreign reporters each year with the aim of building a young cadre of supporters sympathetic to its policy positions. Its active courtship of journalists has been centralised under the auspices of the China Public Diplomacy Association, established under the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in 2012. Three regional bodies conduct exchanges, symposia and study tours to China, in particular to journalists from developing countries. Trainees are schooled not just on China, but also on its view of journalism which strictly rejects critical reporting and objectivity. The targets are ambitious: to train 500 Latin American and Caribbean journalists over five years, and 1,000 African journalists a year by 2020.

Since 2009 China has begun hosting its own international media conventions. These serve as a mechanism to offset the Western journalistic narrative and export China's own journalistic standards and practices. Events include World Media Summit which in 2016 hosted 120 global organisations and 100 media outlets; BRICS Media Summit; and World Internet Conference which in 2017 attracted around 1,000 Internet entrepreneurs, including Apple CEO, Google CEO and vice presidents from Facebook, Microsoft and LinkedIn.

Intimidation

CASE STUDY: A December 2018 survey of 109 members of the Foreign Correspondents of China found that 48 percent of respondents said they'd been followed or had a hotel room entered without permission in the last year. 55 percent said conditions had deteriorated since a year before.

The survey reports that greater pressure is being placed on journalists within China, with 24 out of 27 reporters to Xinjiang reporting interference, and 19 being told to delete data. Concerns about surveillance are escalating, with reporters noticing electronic hacking attacks. Inside China, 75 percent of journalists who reported on the Tiananmen anniversary report interference or intimidation.

Conditions are also worsening for Chinese working for foreign news outlets, with 37 percent of respondents reporting that their local staff had been harassed. Chinese staff working for the Australian Broadcasting Corporation were told that they were ‘traitors’ for working for foreign media, while a Voice of America staffer was kidnapped

for six hours by plainclothes policemen while on a reporting trip. His parents were visited in their hometown by security personnel, and even former college teachers and classmates called him to try to pressure him to leave his job.

Extra-legal measures

CASE STUDY: Exiled Hong Kong media boss Gu Zhuoheng of Sing Pao Media Enterprises, a critic of Chinese corruption, was the target of a kidnap attempt by 20 gun-wielding Chinese state-security agents in a HK hotel. It was foiled by hotel security, and his account was confirmed by HK police.

In Hong Kong, extra-legal measures are being increasingly used against journalists, for example the 2014 chopping attack on one of the city's most influential journalists Ming Pao editor, Kevin Lau Chun-to. The kidnapping of five booksellers who reappeared on the mainland had a further chilling effect on free expression, and self-censorship is increasing, with most newspapers moving to a pro-Beijing position, apart from Jimmy Lai's Apple Daily.

CHINESE ACQUISITIONS AND JOINT VENTURES OVERSEAS

Covert content and radio network

CASE STUDY: Global CAMG Media Group, headquartered in Melbourne is part of Beijing's network of nominally independent radio stations that carry and re-distribute material from the state-run China Radio International (CRI). The independent ‘front’ serves to mask the origin of the content.

Chinese entrepreneurs are serving as state proxies, acquiring overseas media companies and setting up joint ventures. Global CAMG, and local joint venture Ostar, run at least 11 radio stations in Australia, carrying CRI content and producing their own Beijing-friendly shows to sell to other community radio stations aimed at Australia's large population of Mandarin-speakers. The complicated ownership structures mask the fact that they are majority-owned by state-run Chinese bodies.

In 2015, Reuters reported that Global CAMG was one of three companies running a covert network of 33 radio stations broadcasting CRI content in 14 countries. Three years on, Global CAMG (including Ostar), GB Times in Europe and G & E Radio Network in the US now operate 58 stations in 35 countries, according to information from their websites.

Acquiring old brands

CASE STUDY: The 115-year-old Hong Kong paper, South China Morning Post (SCMP) was in 2015 purchased by China's richest man, Jack Ma with the stated intention of acting as a "window" to China for the world. Under his ownership, it has carried interviews with activists in state custody.

China is not simply borrowing boats, but buying the boats outright. Recent academic scholarship has tried to quantify the impact of ownership changes on editorial coverage. One 2015 Masters study by Li Chia-ai found that Taiwan's China Times reduced its coverage of human rights issues in China by two-thirds after it was acquired by a mainland corporation, Want Want. A 2016 study by Chia-Yu Tsai, an assistant professor of political economics at the National University of Kaohsiung, found that the newspapers in the Want Want group had coverage that was 14.6 – 26.7 percent more slanted towards China after the change in ownership.

Under Chinese ownership, the SCMP treads a delicate line, continuing to run granular political analysis and original reporting on sensitive issues such as human rights lawyers and religious crackdowns, while giving increasing prominence to stories about Xi Jinping, pro-Beijing editorials and politically on-message opinion pieces. Since the takeover, SCMP has been criticised for conducting interviews with a number of detained dissidents, leading to accusations it is becoming a propaganda tool.

Chinese money is also being invested in print media far from home, including in South Africa, where companies linked to the Chinese state have a 20 percent stake in Independent Media, the country's second-largest media group, which runs 20 prominent newspapers. One columnist

Azzad Essa had his column cancelled for writing a piece that criticised Beijing's mass internment of Uighurs.

Setting up digital-only brands

CASE STUDY: In Cambodia, a China-based group, NICE Culture Investment, has partnered with the Ministry of State Security to run a television station headquartered within the ministry. Its mission includes importing Chinese technology and live online streaming.

China-affiliated media outlets are experimenting with new digital products and delivery methods. These include 'verticals' or spin-off digital-only channels that supplement existing outlets, as well as apps that provide new functionality. The aim is to reach young, new, China-curious audiences. In countries without established authoritative media and often with young populations - like Vietnam and Cambodia - Chinese companies are helping develop digital-only brands.

HARNESSING DIGITAL DISRUPTION

Social media disinformation campaign

CASE STUDY: Taiwanese officials have blamed China for an aggressive social media disinformation campaign during the 2018 local elections. There was an uptick in fake news stories denigrating the independence-leaning Democratic Progressive Party, who were routed in elections.

"They are doing the kind of disinformation that the Russians are known for doing", says Peter Mattis, a former CIA analyst, now at Jamestown Foundation. He believes the Taiwan example shows an ability to use automatic content farms to rebroadcast and flood social media with fake news. Media warfare has been part of Beijing's military strategy since 2003.

Cables and Telecommunications

CASE STUDY: China is taking control over the nodes of global information with the development of its "digital silk road".

These shifts in the media landscape are game-changing, and taking stock is a necessary step towards designing strategies to protect and strengthen journalists' rights.



Beijing is contracting private Chinese companies to launch television satellites and build networks of fibre-optic cables and data centres to increase its grip over global telecommunications infrastructure. The majority of the 71 countries where China is installing fibre-optic internet cables are in Asia.

Dominating the analogue to digital changeover

CASE STUDY: State proxy, Star Times, has enabled China to increase its control over the key nodes in global information flows, dominating telecommunications networks whilst simultaneously building out new digital highways. It claims to reach 10 million of Africa's 24 million pay TV subscribers.

Over the past six years, CGTN has steadily increased its reach across Africa by virtue of digital transmission infrastructure that privileges pro-Chinese content. Courtesy of StarTimes, CGTN is beamed for free to thousands of rural villages in a number of African countries, including Rwanda and Ghana. StarTimes' cheapest packages bundle together Chinese and African channels, whereas access to the BBC or Al-Jazeera costs more, putting it beyond the means of most viewers. Local companies are also being pushed out of African media markets.



CONCLUSION

China is increasingly asserting its influence overseas in ways which are ultimately deleterious to press freedom. At a time when many media outlets are struggling financially, Beijing is slowly and steadily reshaping the media ecosystem through its long-term investments in media producers, media outlets and media communication technologies. This strategy has the effect of narrowing media diversity and imposing narrative discipline by choking off venues that might once have carried independent voices critical of Beijing. At the same time, state-run newspapers are beginning to play a more aggressive role targeting vocal critics of Beijing.

In each continent, Chinese influence is manifesting in different ways. Below are some of the clearest examples:

- **EAST ASIA:** Joint ventures between local companies and CRI affiliates are taking market share, for example a partnership between Cambodia's Ministry of Security and NICE culture investment in Vietnam, Voice of Vietnam and Guangxi People's Broadcasting make joint programs, while in Myanmar, the Burmese conglomerate, Shwe Than Lwin, has partnered with Yunnan companies and the Australian CRI affiliate.
- **SOUTH ASIA:** Nepali and Indian journalists are being courted on

training schemes for journalists from One Belt One Road countries, receiving education and sponsored reporting trips inside China.

- **US:** Through the China-US Exchange Foundation, lobbyists are helping massage coverage of China-related issues in the US media by taking US journalists on all-expenses paid tours to China, and grooming 'third-party supporters'.
- **AUSTRALIA:** Australian journalists are being brought on sponsored trips to China by the Australia-China Relations Institute at the University of Technology Sydney, which signed an MOU with Xinhua.
- **EUROPE:** GB Times offers a social media brand Unknown Europe which covers Chinese social media platforms like WeChat, Weibo and Douyu. It also offers advertising and sponsorship opportunities to a network of pan-European radio, TV and digital platforms.
- **AFRICA:** The China-backed StarTimes satellite is dominating the analogue-to-digital changeover of telecommunications throughout Africa, helping put CGTN in more African homes through preferential pricing.

Though Beijing's strategy is ambitious, Chinese authors have admitted in state-run media that Beijing often falls

short of its targets, in part as its turgid propaganda holds little attraction for Western audiences, and since the restrictions imposed by censorship act as a drag on its media output. China's primary target has been coopting Chinese language media, but it is now rapidly increasing joint ventures or acquisitions of foreign-language media, boosting its control over content. Such moves underline the sophistication of Beijing's approach, which also treats propaganda as a business to be monetized. It aims to harness the credibility of existing press outlets in countries with well-established authoritative media, while actively helping build new digital outlets in countries where press freedom - and democracy - is still marginal.

One darker side of Beijing's strategy, seen in particular in Hong Kong and Taiwan, is the nascent use of Chinese state-run media and information warfare to interfere with local politics. An aggressive social media disinformation campaign in Taiwan - and the increasing role of the state-run media as a channel to disseminate fake news stories and target those perceived to be critics of Beijing - signals an increasing brazenness towards the use of media warfare tools, and the lack of any international condemnation could embolden their use in future. ■



RECOMMENDATIONS

- Future IFJ study tracking Chinese funding of, and expanded ties with, journalists organisations worldwide
- Additional research on the impact of Chinese investment in Africa, where China is rapidly becoming the dominant player, and Latin America
- Enhanced monitoring of Chinese acquisitions of news outlets or new joint ventures worldwide
- Enhanced monitoring of government regulation of state-run Chinese media outlets
- Developing codes of conduct for IFJ members regarding funded trips and guidelines for those engaging with China
- Considering strategies to utilise IFJ members' lobbying capacities over Chinese state-run propaganda in non-Chinese news outlets
- Exploring opportunities for engagement, including collective agreements, between IFJ affiliates and overseas branches of Chinese-owned media, particularly in developed countries where laws are more favourable to union recognition
- Strategy discussion on enhancing transparency over funding of media outlets
- IFJ establishes and maintain a central database of case studies around the world of known Chinese influence
- IFJ chapters on each continent hold internal discussions to gather data and further recommend action on a continent-by-continent basis

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