

Testimony to the United States House Select Committee on Strategic Competition
between the United States and the Chinese Communist Party

“Discourse Power: The CCP’s Strategy to Shape the Global Information Space”

Christopher Walker
Vice President, Studies & Analysis, National Endowment for Democracy
November 30, 2023

I would like to thank Chairman Gallagher, Ranking Member Krishnamoorthi, and the other esteemed members of the Select Committee for the opportunity to offer testimony on the critical subject of the Chinese Communist Party’s (CCP) influence in the global information space.

For the purposes of this testimony, I will focus principally on two aspects of the CCP’s growing effort to shape the information domain. The first relates to ideas, the second to the global information infrastructure that disseminates the ideas.

The Ambition to Shape the Information Sphere

The authorities in Beijing take information seriously. It is why they devote such extraordinary resources and effort to controlling and manipulating it. They also take ideas seriously, which explains the extent to which the regime works to prevent the emergence of alternative ones, especially in (but not limited to) the Chinese language media ecosystem, within and beyond the PRC’s borders.

At home, the CCP draws on its extensive instruments of state power to smother dissent. Abroad, the Chinese authorities cannot apply unchecked repression. To exert influence internationally, China has established platforms abroad for educational, cultural, and other forms of influence within open societies. Over time, however, it has become clearer that such initiatives tend to be “accompanied by an authoritarian determination to monopolize ideas, suppress alternative narratives, and exploit partner institutions,” namely through the exertion of sharp power that frequently involves efforts at censorship and the use of manipulation to degrade the integrity of independent institutions.¹ For instance, just as Beijing has compelled its domestic internet companies and news outlets to police their own content for violations of regime redlines, it aims “to school its international interlocutors on the boundaries of permissible expression and encourage them to self-censor in a manner that limits candid scrutiny of what China views as sensitive topics”.²

In fact, it is impossible to know for certain the degree to which various forms of conditioning and intimidation by the CCP have already made editors, educators, and others in the knowledge economy and information sector averse to topics the CCP deems sensitive. The authorities in China have “cultivated economic leverage as a tool for getting others to play by its rules, often with a

¹ Christopher Walker, “What is ‘Sharp Power’?”, *Journal of Democracy* 29, no. 3 (July 2018): 18. www.journalofdemocracy.org/articles/what-is-sharp-power/.

² *Sharp Power: Rising Authoritarian Influence*, National Endowment for Democracy, December 2017, 13, www.ned.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/12/Introduction-Sharp-Power-Rising-Authoritarian-Influence.pdf.

view to limiting free expression.”³ In this context, a company’s “success or failure rests not only on its profitability, but also on its ability to meet government demands. This is particularly true in the information sphere, where Chinese and foreign media and technology firms are obliged to comply with CCP censorship requirements.”⁴

To prevent the suppression of free expression at scale, it is critical to expose hidden channels of influence and the pressures that accompany them. This is part of an ongoing need for free and open societies to set up clear standards and processes for building resilience to compromising forms of influence that needs to be done before – not after – pressure comes from the CCP or its proxies.⁵

As China’s interests – commercial and otherwise – have extended around the world, the Chinese authorities have projected their ideas globally. And by privileging a certain set of ideas, the Chinese leadership seeks to advance its interests. Beijing’s ideas – and the values that underpin them – are at direct odds with those of free and open societies. For example, the CCP’s vision is one where information manipulation is the norm, rather than freedom of expression, and where unchecked surveillance technology is used without limits to monitor everyday life. Through its comprehensive information activities, Beijing systematically aims to reduce, neutralize, and preempt any challenges to the CCP’s presentation of itself. The party-state brooks no dissent at home and seeks acquiescence and compliance from its partners abroad.

Simply put, the CCP is seeking to impart to the wider world a different information culture that serves a particular interest: it is one that spans geopolitics, economic arrangements, and – crucially – governance models. As Samantha Hoffman observes, “the PRC’s state security is really about the security of the party, regardless of state borders, and especially in the ideological and political realms.”⁶

But, on their own, ideas are inadequate to meet this ambition. In order to gain traction with audiences around the world, these ideas need means of transmission that are sophisticated and redundant. To this end, the Chinese party state has built up a formidable global information machinery.

The CCP’s Instruments of Transmission in the Global Information Sphere

Official dominance over information and political expression is central to authoritarian governance. This sort of control enables the promotion of favored narratives across media platforms, as well as through the words of state officials and regime surrogates. In an era of global information saturation and fragmentation, decision makers in Beijing recognize the “discourse power” that can be exercised through the repetition and concentration of messages

³ Walker, “What is ‘Sharp Power’?”

⁴ Walker, “What is ‘Sharp Power’?”

⁵ Josh Rogin, “Another university learns the hard way about Chinese censorship on campus,” *Washington Post*, 9 February 2022, www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/2022/02/09/another-university-learns-hard-way-about-chinese-censorship-campus/.

⁶ Samantha Hoffman, *Double-Edged Sword: China’s Sharp Power Exploitation of Emerging Technologies*, National Endowment for Democracy, April 2021, www.ned.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/04/Double-Edged-Sword-Chinas-Sharp-Power-Exploitation-of-Emerging-Technologies-Hoffman-April-2021.pdf.

and narratives. As China's media platforms and information initiatives expand, Beijing's ability to curate information in a systematic and selective manner will grow stronger, especially in places where local media capacity is fragmented or underdeveloped, and the understanding of the Chinese party state is weak. With rapid advances in AI-related technologies, the possibilities for curating and manipulating information at scale are bound to grow even further and more rapidly.

A full treatment of the extent of China's evolving global media capabilities is beyond the scope of this testimony. Over a protracted period of time, China has built a wide-ranging, global media and information infrastructure. The following provides simply some ideas about aspects of the trajectory of development.

State media organizations dominate China's rapid global media expansion. CCP tactics to shape global narratives are manifold: the active promotion of Chinese government-friendly content, media outlets, and narratives; the purposeful dissemination of misleading content to divide audiences and undermine social cohesion; and the suppression of unfavorable information and outlets that are critical of the regime. State-funded research centers, media outlets, people-to-people exchange programs, and a vast network of Confucius Institutes mimic civil society initiatives that in democracies function independently of government.⁷

As part of Beijing's global information ambitions, it leverages foreign media and social media platforms to disseminate its messages. The CCP's primary aim is to shape the international information environment to align with its strategic interests and ideological preferences. For instance, it recently was reported that state-owned China Radio International (CRI) airs its content, without attribution, on commercial radio stations in countries across Europe.⁸ This recent case is reminiscent of another one in which at least 33 radio stations in 14 countries were detected as part of a global radio network "structured in a way that obscured its majority shareholder," the CRI.⁹

In pursuit of its ambitions for compliance and obedience from its interlocutors, the CCP has built a complex infrastructure, including the United Front Work Department, which helps influence and direct much of China's overseas influence efforts throughout China's sprawling bureaucracy, economic actors, and overseas Chinese communities. Efforts by these actors to shape the political and economic choices of other countries extend into the governmental and nongovernmental sectors alike, including official bureaucracies and the business community.¹⁰

China's media complex is global but it is worth noting the particular interest the Chinese party state has taken in settings such as Latin America and Africa. In the latter, China's information infrastructure relies on a combination of Chinese state media bodies and the local media ecosystem in Africa. These efforts involve, for instance, partnerships between Chinese state media and local

⁷ Sarah Cook, "Countering Beijing's Media Manipulation", *Journal of Democracy* 33, no. 1 (January 2022): 116–30, www.journalofdemocracy.org/articles/countering-beijings-media-manipulation/.

⁸ Ivana Karásková, "How China's Propaganda Infiltrated Radio Stations in Europe", *The Diplomat*, 25 September 2023, www.thediplomat.com/2023/09/how-chinas-propaganda-infiltrated-radio-stations-in-europe/.

⁹ Koh Gui Qing and John Shiffman, "Beijing's covert radio network airs China-friendly news across Washington, and the world", *Reuters*, 2 November 2015, www.reuters.com/investigates/special-report/china-radio/.

¹⁰ Elizabeth C. Economy, *The World According to China* (John Wiley & Sons, Inc, January 2022).

media outlets, which can include opaque content sharing agreements; the Belt and Road News Network (BRNN)/Belt and Road News Alliance (BRNA) as channels of influence; other media forums; and the like. Through these channels of influence, the CCP seeks to operate within the African media ecosystem to guide narratives in Beijing's favor.

Meeting a Global Challenge

Given the integral role information plays in how people understand the world around them, China's ambition in the information sphere must be viewed as a top-order issue. In other words, if over time the CCP achieves information dominance beyond its borders in settings around the world, the challenges to freedom of thought and expression – and to democracy more generally – are bound to be more acute. Any response must be intentional and multifaceted.

For its part, the National Endowment for Democracy and its core institutes are pursuing such a multidimensional effort. Given the threat the CCP poses to democracy, its ideas and values, we are working with local partners around the world to strengthen democratic norms and principles. To retake the initiative in this contest, the NED family is working to significantly raise awareness within key communities, building knowledge about the CCP and its methods where such understanding often is thin or lacking entirely, and empowering local actors to be better prepared for the specific tools and approaches the CCP uses.

In this new era of contestation in which the informational domain is central, a long term view will be essential. This, for example, will include a deepening of efforts to enlist professionals working across crucial fields – journalists, freedom of expression and privacy advocates, strategic communications practitioners, media development donors, and tech companies – as a way of elevating responses from within free systems.

More fundamentally, democracies will need a different quality of engagement in the media domain. China has built massive outward-facing media capabilities that are able to curate and leverage content to suit the preferences of political leadership in Beijing. Narratives projected by Beijing – increasingly in conjunction with other authoritarian powers – are aligned in ways that can amplify effect.¹¹ Through these well-resourced media initiatives, the autocrats in Beijing and elsewhere rarely shy away from criticizing democracies. And in narrative competition terms, “the relentless assailing of democracy and ideas that underlie it by the autocracies has undoubtedly had an impact,” in corrosive ways we still do not fully understand.¹²

Given these conditions, the U.S. and other democracies will be obliged to invest far more into information and media domains in ways that can more meaningfully compete with the already well-developed CCP-driven global authoritarian media infrastructure.

¹¹ Iria Puyosa & Mariví Marín Vázquez, ed. Adam Fivenson, [*Deepening the Response to Authoritarian Information Operations in Latin America*](#), National Endowment for Democracy, 28 November 2023,.

¹² William J. Dobson, Tarek E. Masoud, and Christopher Walker, [*Defending Democracy in an Age of Sharp Power*](#) (Johns Hopkins University Press, 2023).