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Sub-Committee on State Department and USAID Management, International Operations,
and Bilateral International Development
On "The Global Engagement Center: Leading the United States Government's Fight
Against Global Disinformation Threat"

China's Censorship, Propaganda and Disinformation

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Senator Portman and Senator Booker, members of the committee, thank you for your attention to this very important topic. Unfortunately, even as we speak we are witnessing the very real costs to global public health and safety of China's system of disinformation and global censorship efforts.

We must ask ourselves: How much more widespread is the coronavirus because of China's censorship? We know that Li Wenliang, Xu Zhangrun, Chen Qiushi, Fang Bin and countless other doctors, journalists, and activists who spoke out and tried to tell the truth about the seriousness of the virus and inept response were silenced, arrested and intimidated.

Not only did the CCP silence the truth, it also pushed false narratives about an influenza epidemic in the United States, criticized the United States for "[creating chaos] and [spreading] fear with travel restrictions, and lied about hospital construction.¹ Authorities have shut down WeChat groups and social media discourse, punished individuals, and removed articles that portray the government response in a negative way.²

The recent response to the virus shows us that censorship and disinformation is a "feature", not a "bug," of the CCP's system of government. A war on the truth is a central pillar of the CCP's strategy for survival. Let me try to illustrate by naming just a few organizations tasked with censorship within China:³

1. The General Administration of Press and Publication (GAPP) – GAPP drafts and enforces restraint regulations.
2. State Administration of Radio, Film, and Television (SARFT) – SARFT controls the content on radio, film, and TV aired in China.
3. Ministry for Information Industry (MII) – MII regulates the Chinese telecommunication, software industries, and Internet related services.
4. State Council Information Office (SCIO) – SCIO promotes Chinese media to a global audience and is also responsible for restricting news that is posted on the Internet.
5. Central Propaganda Department (CPD) – CPD is the Party organ that works with GAPP and SARFT to monitor content.
6. Ministry of Public Security (MPS) – MPS monitors and filters the Internet and punishes and detains those who speak out.

¹ Singer, Peter, "How China is Working to Quarantine the Truth about the Coronavirus," Defense One, February 9, 2020, <https://www.defenseone.com/ideas/2020/02/how-china-working-quarantine-truth-about-coronavirus/162985/?oref=d-dontmiss>.

² Zhong, Raymond. "China Clamps Down on Coronavirus Coverage as Cases Surge." *The New York Times*, February 6, 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/02/05/world/asia/china-coronavirus-censorship.html?searchResultPosition=13>.

³ "Agencies Responsible for Censorship in China." Congressional-Executive Commission on China. Accessed February 28, 2020. <https://www.cecc.gov/agencies-responsible-for-censorship-in-china>.

7. General Administration for Customs – Customs collects books, videos, and other information that China does not want in its borders.
8. State Secrecy Bureau (SSB) – SSB enforces state secrecy laws, which are often used to punish individuals who write undesirable content.
9. Judiciary – The Judiciary does not play a direct role in enforcing censorship, but it ultimately convicts and hands out the sentences for those arrested on censorship related charges.

As you can see, the CCP has constructed this massive propaganda and censorship apparatus because it considers the truth to be dangerous. It does not want its citizens to know the extent of its corruption, its repression, its mismanagement of the economy, and of crises such as the current virus, bird flu in 1997 and SARS in 2003.⁴

And, it seeks to shut about the true nature of democracy and freedom in places like Taiwan or here in the US. It relies upon its massive “lie-producing apparatus” in attempts to rally the party cadre and the people to support its plans to “rejuvenate China and march toward the center of geopolitics,” or in other words, to take back its perceived “rightful” place as the world’s leading power. This requires a narrative that the US is an enemy that must be brought down.

Under Xi Jinping this has all gotten much worse. In February 2016 on a tour of Chinese media outlets, Xi announced “all the work by the party’s media must reflect the party’s will, safeguard the party’s authority, and safeguard the party’s unity.”⁵ The job of Chinese’s media is not to inform the public and search for the truth. Rather, it is to “report” stories favorable to Xi and the party and censor those that are not.

“Controlling” The Internet

PRC censorship efforts can be highly effective. There are two major internet censorship programs: The “Great Firewall” and the “Golden Shield” program rapidly censor internet content produced within the PRC. The PRC seeks to assert new state prerogatives in the information domain, such as “internet sovereignty” and “data sovereignty.” The PRC has also proposed an International Code of Conduct on Information Security (with the support of the Russian Federation) to the United Nations that would put states in control of the Internet. These changes would significantly enhance the effectiveness of PRC control of the Internet.

⁴ Richburg, Keith, “Bird flu. SARS. China coronavirus. Is history repeating itself?” STAT, January 27, 2020, <https://www.statnews.com/2020/01/27/bird-flu-sars-china-coronavirus-is-history-repeating-itself/>.

⁵ “Xi Jinping Asks for 'Absolute Loyalty' from Chinese State Media.” The Guardian, February 19, 2016. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/feb/19/xi-jinping-tours-chinas-top-state-media-outlets-to-boost-loyalty>.

The CCP and The Media

Chinese media portrays specific criticism that the West has, such as on human rights issues, as being “anti-China,” as if a story about human rights abuses is an affront to all Chinese people. Recently, the Chinese propaganda machine has started manipulating Western sensibilities by calling any criticism of Chinese government actions “racist” against all Chinese. The goal is clear: to shut down such criticism.

Chinese media have long deliberately misrepresented events. For example, during the 2008 Olympic Torch Relay, CCTV described all protestors in the West as “Tibetan separatists and members of other anti-China groups” who that “repeatedly assaulted” torchbearers.⁶ This was simply not true. Almost all such protests were peaceful and joined by many different ethnic groups in the US and other countries. The cause of religious and cultural freedom in Tibet has long been championed in the West.

More recently, China has accused the United States of “sinister intentions” after Congress passed the Hong Kong Human Rights and Democracy Act of 2019.⁷ Xinhua published a statement from the Hong Kong Liaison Office accusing the US of supporting violence and instability.⁸ The truth that the Congress cares about the basic rights of Hong Kongers and about the CCP upholding its obligations is simply assaulted. The CCP wants its people and targeted groups around the world to think that Hong Kong (like Taiwan) is simply an internal Chinese issue and that the US acts imperialistically and with an unrelenting anti-Chinese bias.

The Chinese government monitors, harasses, and bans Western journalists who publish content portraying China in a “negative” light. Examples include:

1. Recently, China kicked three Wall Street Journal journalists out of the country after the Journal published an op-ed about China that spoked the truth about the risks China’s system of government poses to the world.
2. China blocked access to the New York Times’s website after the Times published a piece on Wen Jiabao’s family wealth in 2012.⁹
3. Bloomberg self-censored an investigative report on the wealth of Princeling families to protect their journalists (or their bottom line).¹⁰
4. The recent arrest of Jimmy Lai, the founder of Apple Daily and a Hong Kong media mogul, ostensibly for participating in an illegal assembly during the 2017 anti-government protests was

⁶ CCTV, “Beijing Olympic Flame’s Overall Journey - Light the Passion, Share the Dream,” August 8, 2008, <http://www.cctv.com/program/sportsscene/20080808/104347.shtml>.

⁷ Grace Shao, Christine Wang, and Evelyn Cheng, “China Accuses US of ‘Sinister Intentions’ after Trump Signs Bills Supporting Hong Kong Protesters,” CNBC, November 27, 2019, <https://www.cnbc.com/2019/11/28/china-condemns-us-bills-supporting-hong-kong-protesters.html>.

⁸ Xinhua, “Xianggang Zhonglianban Jiu Meiguo ‘2019 Nian Xianggang Renquan yu Minzhu Fa’an’ Qianshu Chengfa Fabiao Shenming” [Hong Kong Joint Office Issues a Statement on the Signing of the US ‘Hong Kong Human Rights and Democracy Act 2019’], November 28, 2019, http://www.xinhuanet.com/2019-11/28/c_1125284253.htm.

⁹ Bradsher, Keith, “China Blocks Web Access to Times After Article,” *The New York Times*, October 25, 2012, <https://www.nytimes.com/2012/10/26/world/asia/china-blocks-web-access-to-new-york-times.html>.

¹⁰ Wong, Edward. “Bloomberg News Is Said to Curb Articles That Might Anger China.” *The New York Times*, November 9, 2013. <https://www.nytimes.com/2013/11/09/world/asia/bloomberg-news-is-said-to-curb-articles-that-might-anger-china.html>.

meant to silence him (he too had just written a critical op-ed in the WSJ) and his paper as well as punish him for supporting pro-democracy movements.¹¹

The CCP has always used access to China as a key point of leverage to shape perceptions. For years before these arrests China would blacklist scholars and analysts from entering the country if they were deemed to be “anti-China.” Recently they have upped the ante to try and change the way the Western media portrays the CCP or to force self-censorship. Time will tell how well this works. It will certainly be harder to investigate controversial stories within China or to seek the truth.

The CCP also uses physical intimidation to enforce censorship. 57% of respondents of a Foreign Correspondents’ Club of China survey reported some form of interference, harassment, or violence while attempting to report in China, and 8% have reported manhandling or use of physical force.¹² 26% of respondents reported that Chinese government officials have harassed, detained, questioned, or punished their sources.¹³

Going After US Popular Culture

Not only does China target journalists and media in their territory, they have started to influence our pop culture abroad. Beijing knows that its people have great admiration for American sports and pop culture icons. It therefore believes it must control what such figures might say with an extreme intensity. Two examples highlight the level of Chinese interference: Basketball and Hollywood.

The case of the National Basketball Association in China is a case of China using its market power to make Americans curtail their free speech. It began when Houston Rockets general manager Dennis Morley tweeted an image that read, “Fight for freedom, stand with Hong Kong.” This was during Hong Kong’s demonstration over its basic human rights.

The Chinese response was fast and furious: Chinese tech giant Tencent and state broadcaster CCTV suspended broadcasts of Rockets games, while other sponsors suspended relations with the team. Rockets owner Tilman Fertitta publicly rebuked his general manager. All-Star James Harden apologized for Morey’s tweet. The NBA released a statement in Mandarin expressing disappointment in Morey.¹⁴

Like many American businesses, the NBA is making billions of dollars in the China market, on viewership, digital ownership rights, merchandising and individual player sponsorship. To be sure, the Chinese do not have absolute power in disputes like this. The Chinese people love the “product,” as they do so many American products, and the Chinese censorship apparatus backed off eventually. But still the

¹¹ <https://www.scmp.com/news/hong-kong/politics/article/3052789/hong-kong-protests-apple-daily-owner-jimmy-lai-arrested>

¹² The Foreign Correspondents’ Club, Hong Kong, “Censorship and reporting in China: New survey reveals increased harassment and physical violence,” <https://www.fcchk.org/correspondent/censorship-and-reporting-in-china-new-survey-reveals-increased-harassment-and-physical-violence/>

¹⁴ Though commissioner Adam Silver backtracked, stating that the NBA is “not apologizing for Daryl exercising his freedom of expression”

episode shows the extent the high stakes of China's censorship efforts. Indeed the lure of the China market is the most powerful weapon the Chinese have in their fight to stave off *any* criticism of the regime's practices and abuses.¹⁵

Chinese censorship has also hit the heart of American entertainment in Hollywood. Americans have likely noticed the absence of Chinese villains or "bad guys" in American movies. No other country including our own is spared negative portrayals in film or television. Since China agreed to open their market to foreign films in 2012, Hollywood has had to make concessions to their Chinese censors. Producers and directors must coordinate with the Chinese government or lose access to the Chinese market.¹⁶ Films with Chinese characters portrayed poorly, such as Christopher Nolan's "Dark Knight," are not even submitted for approval in China.¹⁷

As the writer Martha Bayles has chronicled China believes that films are also a tool of the state and their content should align with the CCP's ideology. The forthcoming *Top Gun: Maverick—a sequel financed in part by the Chinese firm Tencent—omitted the Japanese and Taiwanese flag from Tom Cruise's jacket...*¹⁸

According to Bayles, in addition to the many censorship and propaganda organizations mentioned above, films now also have to pass muster with the State Ethnic Affairs Commission, the Ministry of Public Security, the State Bureau of Religious Affairs, the Ministry of Education, the Ministry of Justice, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and numerous other bureaucratic entities.¹⁹

China has also started to make their own blockbusters for their domestic market. Movies made for the China market are forthright in their portrayal of China as brave and righteous and America as weak and decadent. According to Bayles:

*...The prime example is Wolf Warrior 2 (2017), a nonstop tsunami of gun battles, massive explosions, wrenching hand-to-hand combat, and a spectacular tank chase, which hammers away at a single message: China is bringing security, prosperity, and modern health care to Africa, while the United States is bringing only misery. The film broke all box-office records in China and is still, at \$5.6 billion, its highest-grossing film ever.*²⁰

¹⁵ Myers, Steven Lee, and Chris Buckley. "American Basketball vs. Chinese Hardball: Guess Who Won." *The New York Times*, October 13, 2019. <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/10/13/world/asia/china-nba-censorship.html?searchResultPosition=11>.

¹⁶ Cohen, David S., "'Transformers': A Splendidly Patriotic Film, If You Happen To Be Chinese (Opinion)," *Variety*, July 3, 2014, <https://variety.com/2014/film/columns/transformers-age-of-extinction-patriotic-for-china-1201257030/>.

¹⁷ Bustan, Yuval, "Why are there no more Chinese villains in American films?," *Forbes Israel*, November 18, 2018, <http://e.forbes.co.il/why-are-there-no-more-chinese-villains-in-american-films/> and "How China Is Taking Control of Hollywood." *The Heritage Foundation*. Accessed February 28, 2020. <https://www.heritage.org/asia/heritage-explains/how-china-taking-control-hollywood>.

¹⁸ Martha Bayles, "Hollywood's Great Leap Backward on Free Expression," *The Atlantic*, September 15, 2019, <https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2019/09/hollywoods-great-leap-backward-free-expression/598045/>.

¹⁹ IBID

²⁰ Bayles, "Hollywood's Great Leap Backward on Free Expression."

The influence over the content of films is consistent with China's "ideological work": its propaganda work in other forms. Hong Kong is not to be mentioned, Taiwan is to be wiped off the map as an independent entity, China is not abusing Uighur or Tibetan rights, and China is an ascendant power doing right by the world while America is weak, decadent and cowardly. As mentioned in the case of the NBA, the most powerful weapon China has to bend the West to its ideological agenda is the lure of the Chinese market. One cannot overstate how important these efforts are.

American pop culture is one of its competitive advantages, enjoyed by billions across the globe. When repressed populations really begin to ask why America is so dominant in entertainment, they find the answer to be its freedom – its free-markets, its innovative and creative culture. If China can co-opt cultural icons, people lose faith in the power of these ideas.

Propaganda and Disinformation to Support Foreign Policy

A key line of effort of Chinese grand strategy is to break US alliances. Consistent with that strategy, Chinese state media attacks American allies as being economically dependent on the United States and highlights fragility in the relationships. Japan is a frequent target. China Daily has also described Britain as "currying favor" with the United States because it has no choice after it leaves the European Union.²¹ Other themes include the loss of sovereignty to the US and economic dependency on the US. These themes come up in both Chinese and English-language articles and op-eds in media outlets such as China.com, Xinhua, China Daily, and Global Times, and are shared on social media.

Taiwan Fights Back

Taiwan is the primary target of PRC influence operations, most noticeably in the November 2018 elections where Nationalist Party (Beijing-friendly) candidates won an unexpected number of seats. However, PRC influence had less of an impact in the most recent elections in January 2020. The Taiwanese government worked closely with tech companies in order to counter the spread of disinformation. The Taiwanese government worked with Facebook's "regional elections center" to remove pages that used fraudulent methods to boost the popularity of their content.²² Twitter held training sessions for the Democratic Progressive Party (DPP), the Kuomintang (KMT), and Taiwan's Central Election Commission, and they set up a portal for feedback during the election. Google has partnered with volunteers and organizations like MyGoPen, Taiwan FactCheck Center and the Poynter Institute's International Fact-Checking Network to increase awareness of disinformation and to flag fake news on its platforms, including YouTube.²³ In addition to these efforts, the Taiwanese government uses

²¹ China Daily, "UK should try to have more than one friend: China Daily editorial," September 6, 2018, <http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/a/201809/06/WS5b911253a31033b4f4654a8e.html> and Chen, Yang, "Is the sun setting on the US-Japan alliance?," Global Times, <https://www.globaltimes.cn/content/1162083.shtml>.

²² Wong, Chun Han and Philip Wen, "Taiwan Turns to Facebook and Viral Memes to Counter China's Disinformation," <https://www.wsj.com/articles/taiwan-turns-to-facebook-and-viral-memes-to-counter-chinas-disinformation-11578047403>.

²³ <https://techcrunch.com/2020/01/07/why-the-world-must-pay-attention-to-the-fight-against-disinformation-and-fake-news-in-taiwan/>

their own social media presence to counter disinformation through memes.²⁴ For example, Premier Su Tseng-chang debunked a rumor that he will punish certain hairstyles with a humorous meme depicting his baldness.

Taiwan has also passed legislation to counter political interference. The Anti-Infiltration Bill heightens penalties for Chinese-backed efforts to lobby Taiwanese politicians or participate in election campaigns.²⁵ Finally, Taiwanese citizens and civil society play a prominent role in identifying fake information. The Taiwan FactCheck Center is a Snopes-like organization that works with Facebook to check disinformation on Taiwanese social network pages. CoFacts is another crowd-sourced fact-checking organization run by volunteers.²⁶ Advocacy groups such as the Taiwan FactChecker center can help social media sites verify information.

What to Do?

Strategic approaches to China's mass use of censorship, propaganda, and disinformation can be broken up into two categories: China's targeting of its own people and China's external efforts. There are offensive and defensive measures we can take. Remember, the CCP relies upon lies to stay in power.

First, the US should substantially ramp up its own Chinese-language efforts (we have the broadcasting institutions already) to tell the truth to the Chinese people about how they are governed. The truth about public health, the environment, corruption, and injustice. We should place ourselves on the side of the Chinese people and help them discover the truth that could better their lives. Obviously the Chinese will try to block all such efforts. But multimedia campaign in Chinese make their way into China. Censorship is a cat and mouse game, and the regime needs to spend ever-greater resources to stop their people from learning the truth. When we had the USIA, we had career paths for those who wanted to be "information officers" or even "information warriors" – we need that again. Simply put, China has been engaging in "political warfare" against us for decades – all means other than actual warfare to undermine our global leadership. We have not engaged the political warfare fight.

The GEC can fill this gap if properly funded and staffed with Mandarin-speakers. Such efforts should also tell America's story in Chinese. Public diplomacy together with multimedia campaigns should explain

²⁴ Wong, Chun Han and Philip Wen, "Taiwan Turns to Facebook and Viral Memes to Counter China's Disinformation"

Magnier, Mark. "West Studies China's Disinformation Campaign in Taiwan Looking for Clues." South China Morning Post, February 17, 2020. <https://www.scmp.com/news/china/article/3045648/west-studies-beijings-disinformation-campaign-taiwan-looking-clues-its>.

²⁵ Aspinwall, Nick, "Taiwan Passes Anti-Infiltration Act Ahead of Election Amid Opposition Protests," The Diplomat, January 3, 2020, <https://thediplomat.com/2020/01/taiwan-passes-anti-infiltration-act-ahead-of-election-amid-opposition-protests/>.

²⁶ Su, Alice, "Can Fact-Checkers Save Taiwan From a Flood of Chinese Fake News?," LA Times, December 16, 2019, <https://www.latimes.com/world-nation/story/2019-12-16/taiwan-the-new-frontier-of-disinformation-battles-chinese-fake-news-as-elections-approach>.

and persuade – we need to tell the story of why support basic democratic values in Hong Kong and Taiwan and how we would do so in China as well. We need not be defensive about our foreign policy. Relatedly, the special forces command should not be in this business unless tasked with very specific military-related functions. The GEC working with the State Department bureaus in charge of East Asia and public diplomacy should be the lead information operators.

Second, we should pass suggested legislation and amend it that so we can do a better job of highlighting the origin of political ads, particularly from foreign sources as well as advertising the origin of content of social and regular media from countries we have deemed rivals or enemies in our national security documents.

Third, we should set up a center for excellence in combatting disinformation in Taiwan. Taipei faced down an onslaught during its past election. Many countries including our own can learn from it. And it is a Mandarin-speaking country that knows what messages work in Chinese and in Chinese culture.

Fourth, congressional leaders and administration leaders can do a better job in our own country explaining the exact nature of Chinese abuses of human rights and its censorship activities. Pressure should be put on US entertainment icons – they will likely face a backlash among their own viewership and customers if the public is more informed about China’s gross abuses.

Fifth, Congress can continue to help set industry standards and best practices that guide social media companies in facilitating information sharing with each other and with the private and public sectors, including disclosing automated accounts, providing the locational origin or content, and providing users with more context when they see certain content.

Sixth, the administration should be encouraged to accelerate and broaden efforts to designate Chinese state controlled media companies as foreign agents who need to register as such and to make sure that “journalists” working for such entities are not credentialed as journalists. Congress could help by publishing and widely disseminating easily digestible information and the Chinese mass censorship and media control system. The American people should know exactly where their information from China is coming from and who is paying for it.

To summarize, disinformation, censorship, and propaganda are central to the CCP’s political strategy for survival. Under Xi Jinping, they have become even more important lines of effort. This is because the truth is dangerous. The CCP cannot allow its citizens to know that freedom and democracy work in Taiwan and the West, that Hong Kongers are demanding their basic freedoms, that the US is force for good in the world. It cannot admit any failures of governance, from mismanagement of the viral outbreaks to a starkly slowing economy. The CCP has been struggling for legitimacy and a *raison d’être* since it began allowing markets to function (and thus undermined Maoism) and certainly since its violent crackdown on protestors in Tiananmen Square in 1989. It now coerces its people to accept its legitimacy and needs to protect itself in a web of lies. And, since Xi has also set very ambitious geopolitical goals for his country to rejuvenate and return to its “rightful” place as the Middle Kingdom,

CCP propaganda targets the United States. It does so in its influence over movies in which the US is portrayed as declining and decadent and in its media portrayal of the US as greedy and overbearing.

While the CCP has a vast apparatus to control information, arguably its most powerful tool is its market size. The economy may be slowing but the consumer market is still very large. The CCP will threaten US media and entertainment companies with loss of market and financing if they deviate from the CCP party line. We need to break down and publicize as much as possible the specific entities that propagate the CCP's ideological line and stop treating Chinese "media" as anything but foreign agents.