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China's presence and influence in the European information space in Europe

FIMI and online visibility

In today's digital information environment, political information is always competing for public attention. In political communication – including foreign information manipulation and interference (FIMI) – this raises questions about information salience, meaning the visibility and accessibility of particular political views and narratives.

China's influences on political information flows

We distinguish two main types of influence that promote narratives aligned with the Chinese government:

1) State activities.
China has increased public diplomacy and media activities across multiple channels. While the effects on Europe remain inconclusive, some actions clearly aim to skew online visibility in favour of pro-China narratives by amplifying official perspectives and discouraging criticism.

2) Social influences.
Self-censorship is important in reducing the visibility of critical views in China. At the same time, nationalism motivates people to defend China and subscribe to pro-government perspectives, increasing their salience.

Together, China's influences on political discussion in the EU information space are both shaped by direct government interference and wider social dynamics. The challenge for European policymakers lies in maintaining liberal democratic norms when actors work to undermine those norms without always breaking laws.

The European context

Since 2023, the European Union External Action Service (EEAS) has expanded efforts to identify and understand FIMI. Although the suppression of information has been flagged as an important element, it is still not well integrated into the FIMI framework. FIMI is still often treated as deliberate state-led activity, while the role of non-state actors and broader societal dynamics remain underexamined.

Better understanding of how different Chinese actors shape information salience helps strengthen the European response. Greater awareness of these dynamics can also support freedom of information and align with UN Sustainable Development Goal 16.10 on public access to information and fundamental freedoms.

Key Messages

- State and social actors both shape political information flows online
- Critical voices are not always suppressed directly by the state
- Social norms strongly influence debates about China
- Evidence shows there is state-coordinated media activity within EU borders
- The scale of such operations remains unknown, more research is needed
- Policy responses should vary depending on different actors and activities

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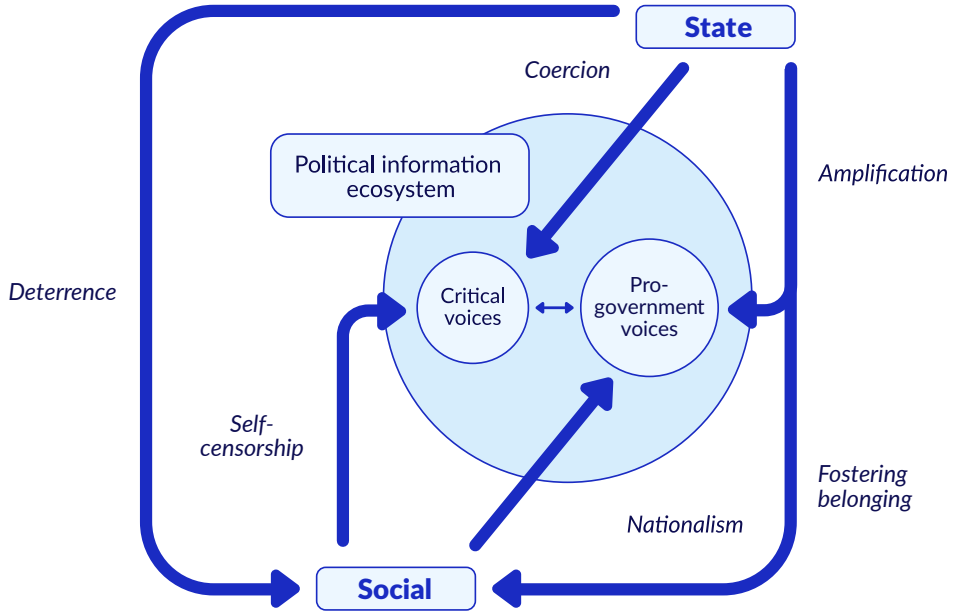

Figure 1. China's State and Social Influences on the Salience of Critical versus Pro-Government Voices in the EU's Information Space.

Government activities

China has expanded efforts to shape narratives beyond its borders through public diplomacy as well as more illicit practices. Both can influence the salience of political information.

Rather than direct censorship, these activities often rely on increased production of pro-government content. Systematically increasing the production and thus the salience of such content not only promotes state messages, but makes critical voices harder to find and access – a strategy usually referred to as "flooding".[1]

The Going Global campaign, introduced in the 13th Five-Year Plan (2016-2020), aims to expand China's global communication presence by "expanding overseas communication networks", "establishing flagship media", and "leveraging information network infrastructures".[2] Since then state-affiliated social media accounts have risen significantly on global platforms.[3] Between June 2020 and March 2021, Chinese diplomats and state media operated 176 accounts on Twitter and Facebook, posting 700,000 times while receiving 355 million likes and 27 million comments.[4] These efforts support the broader goal of "telling China's story well" and promoting a positive image of China abroad.[5]

Three techniques are particularly relevant for understanding how government-linked actors shape online visibility in Europe:

1. Amplification

Some state-affiliated social media accounts engage in inauthentic behaviour to boost the reach of official messaging. Researchers in the UK have identified networks of automated users amplifying posts by Chinese government representatives, with China appearing more active in this area than Russia or Iran.[6] While bot effectiveness remains limited, advances in generative AI are likely to increase the scale and sophistication of amplification.[7]

2. State media partnerships
Chinese state media maintain partnerships with influential news organisations in Europe, which can indirectly shape coverage of China. Xinhua has agreements with Reuters, AP, and PA Media Group,[8] alongside bilateral agreements with national outlets in Italy, Czechia, and Hungary.[9] Evidence suggests such agreements can allow official Chinese media content to "invisibly" find its way into national news broadcasts.[10]

3. Fake news websites
Investigations indicate the existence of more than 100 website posing as local news outlets while operating from China and promoting pro-Beijing narratives, including in several EU countries.[11] The reach and exposure of these websites appears limited, but it is expected to increase as techniques for creating and disseminating this type of content become more advanced.

The importance role of private firms cannot be understated, as companies based in China are often the direct implementors of online content creation, obscuring the identity of potential stakeholders behind such actions.[12]

Social influences

Apart from direct government interventions, social norms strongly shape how political views are expressed online. Also in China's domestic context, citizens are found to play an important role in shaping which political perspectives become salient online, and which remain in the margins.[13] As Chinese diaspora have become increasingly prominent in geopolitical debates abroad, similar social mechanisms influence online political discourse in the EU. Most important here are self-censorship and nationalism.

Self-censorship

Among China experts, it is common knowledge that the scale and impact of self-censorship is considerably higher than actual censorship by the state itself.[14] Self-censorship is both the result of fear for potential sanctions by the state and of indirect social processes such as the formation of norms that result in "collective silence".[15] By adhering to perceived constraints on what is socially and politically acceptable, self-censorship reduces the salience of perspectives critical toward the Chinese government.

Fear of potential retribution by the Chinese state is one of the key drivers behind self-censorship. Within China, although even less than 1% of journalists are directly sanctioned for critical attitudes toward the state, the remaining 99% is affected just through fear of sanctions.[16]

Among European journalists, similar dynamics play a role. Journalists working on China frequently report "social and psychological pressure" due to fear of potential sanctions by the Chinese state. Fears include direct harassment by the Chinese state but also indirect sanctions such as travel restrictions, which can have both personal and professional consequences.[17]

The psychological pressures due to the uncertainty about the sensitivity of one's actions puts additional pressure on reporters and thus increases their difficulty to perform their work. It is often thought that uncertainty, and the constant political calculation it requires, has an overall "exhausting" effect (also known as "chilling effect") on journalists reporting on China, and especially among those taking a critical stance. Currently, editorial teams are often unequipped to support reporters under such circumstances.

Self-censorship is also driven by social norms.[18] Once avoiding certain sensitive topics becomes customary, self-censorship reinforces itself, making raising certain topics awkward in social situations. This collective silence – sometimes referred to as "public secrecy"[19] – can raise further barriers for critical debates,[20] and hinder the work of journalists and academic working on sensitive political topics.[21] Chinese diaspora members, some of whom work as knowledge professionals on China, are clearly reluctant to talk about topics that are highly sensitive in the Chinese context, such as human rights violations in Xinjiang and the status of Taiwan in the international system.[22] As a result, their perspectives are frequently neither voiced nor heard in public debates, leaving room for other actors to fill that space with alternative, potentially pro-government political perspectives.

Nationalism

Nationalism is a powerful motivator for individuals to spread positive views about China and, by extension, the Chinese government. In diaspora contexts, geopolitical debates can be perceived as threatening to one's identity,[23] and can cause some diaspora members to actively defend China when its position as a global power is undermined. Nationalism is both a bottom-up social phenomenon and actively shaped by the government, for instance through patriotic education.[24] In online political discussion in China, nationalism plays a prominent role in motivating regime-defensive tendencies.[25] On social media, this is apparent when citizens with strong nationalist sentiments promote the regime or counter critical voices online. Such online fanatics are sometimes referred to as "Little Pinks" (xiaofenhong) and regarded as a political force in their own right.[26] In extreme cases, such regime-defensive behaviour can turn into a form of digital vigilantism, where regime defenders go as far as to intimidate and harass opposition views.[27] Together this contributes to an atmosphere where individuals feel the pressure to align their publicly expressed views to nationalist and pro-government perspectives.[28]

In the EU, nationalism contributes to similar dynamics, where China-critical voices face backlashes, while China-positive content does not. Media critics of the Chinese state and its domestic governance often experience harsh criticism and even online harassment. For example, a Germany-based journalist who has published criticisms of the human-rights abuses in China, became a target of continuous online harassment, including threatening messages and a smear campaign.[29] Online backlash extends to live streams or public commentaries on China, with individuals receive threatening or disturbing messages in response to being critical of China or the Chinese government, usually from online media users with Chinese roots.[30]

Whether such online harassment is executed by nationalist individuals acting on their own accord, or whether it is part of an official operation often remains unclear. We suspect that both are true; while nationalism fosters genuine user-driven actions online, the government actively plays into nationalist sentiments to mobilise Chinese citizens and diaspora to "defend" their country against critics.

Nationalism thus contributes to the salience of pro-government perspectives online. It makes online spaces more conducive to pro-China narratives, as users holding such views feel encouraged to share them publicly, particularly on WeChat and Chinese-language channels.[31]

Taken together, many of the online actions motivated by nationalism are not against the law – except for the most extreme cases of harassment and intimidation – but can rather be seen as "transgressive" of liberal democratic norms.[32]

When developing policies:

- **Think about information salience**. In today's information space, political information is increasingly competing for the attention of online audiences. An important part of political communication – and FIMI – is information salience. Political perspectives become more visible while others remain in the margins.

- **Consider both state and non-state actors.** The flow of political information is not only influenced by direct and deliberate government actions. State strategies to promote certain perspectives exist side-by-side with more socially motivated actors shaping information salience.

- **Be aware of social norms and pressures.** Social norms and pressures powerfully shape public political expression and thus the flow of political information online. In the case of competing perspectives about China, self-censorship and nationalism play a significant role.

- **Be careful with attribution.** Uncertainty persists when it comes to attributing Chinese state influence and interference in the EU information space. The scale of operations of the Chinese state within the EU requires further systematic assessment.

- **Safeguard open and critical public discussion.** Support for illiberal views among diaspora communities can be caused by lack of identification with one's democratic host country. Be mindful to take a balanced approach to Chinese diaspora communities, also when they support the Chinese government. Promoting and protecting their genuine democratic participation may increase engagement in critical discussion and strengthen their commitment to liberal democratic norms.

Notes:

[1] Margaret E. Roberts, Censored: *Distraction and Diversion Inside China`s Great Firewall* (Princeton University Press, 2018).

[2] Yingjie Fan et al., "Strategies of Chinese State Media on Twitter," *Political Communication* 41, no. 1 (2024): 4–25.

[3] See also Zhao Alexandre Huang and Rui Wang, "Building a Network to ``Tell China Stories Well'': Chinese Diplomatic Communication Strategies on Twitter," *International Journal of Communication* 13 (2019): 2984–3007.

[4] M. Schliebs et al., China's Public Diplomacy Operations: *Understanding Engagement and Inauthentic Amplification of PRC Diplomats on Facebook and Twitter* (Programme on Democracy and Technology, Oxford University., 2021), ora.ox.ac.uk/objects/uuid:427320a1-c677-40d4-b4a5-1759e563e7ed.

[5] Hannah Bailey, *Discursive Statecraft: China's Information Operations, no. GPP03* (Council on Geostrategy, 2023); Katja Drinhausen et al., *Image Control: How China Struggles for Discourse Power* (MERICS, 2023).

[6] For comparison between various countries' online information manipulation see Samantha Bradshaw et al., *Industrialized Disinformation: 2020 Global Inventory of Organized Social Media Manipulation* (Computational Propaganda Project at the Oxford Internet Institute, 2021); Hannah Bailey and Philip N Howard, The Instigators and Targets of Organised Social Media Manipulation: (Oxford University: Internet Institute, 2022).

[7] William Marcellino et al., *The Rise of Generative AI and the Coming Era of Social Media Manipulation 3.0: Next-Generation Chinese Astroturfing and Coping with Ubiquitous AI* (2023), www.rand.org/pubs/perspectives/PEA2679-1.html; Brett J. Goldstein and Brett V. Benson, "The Era of A.I. Propaganda Has Arrived, and America Must Act," Opinion, *The New York Times*, August 5, 2025, www.nytimes.com/2025/08/05/opinion/china-ai-propaganda.html.

Notes continues:

[8] David Bandurski, "The Politics of Pure Business," China Media Project, July 3, 2024, chinamediaproject.org/2024/07/03/the-politics-of-the-media-deal/.

[9] Raksha Kumar, "How China Uses the News Media as a Weapon in Its Propaganda War against the West," *Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism*, December 9, 2024, reutersinstitute.politics.ox.ac.uk/news/how-china-uses-news-media-weapon-its-propaganda-war-against-west.

[10] Ardi Bouwers and Susanne Kamerling, *Chinese influence and interference in the Dutch media landscape* (China Knowledge Network, 2024), 33.

[11] See Alberto Fittarelli, *PAPERWALL: Chinese Websites Posing as Local News Outlets Target Global Audiences with Pro-Beijing Content* (Citizen Lab, University of Toronto, 2024), citizenlab.ca/2024/02/paperwall-chinese-websites-posing-as-local-news-outlets-with-pro-beijing-content/.

[12] See, for instance, Goldstein and Benson, "The Era of A.I. Propaganda Has Arrived, and America Must Act."

[13] See Min Jiang, "Authoritarian Deliberation on Chinese Internet," *Electronic Journal of Communication* 20, nos. 3 & 4 (2010); Rongbin Han, *Contesting Cyberspace in China: Online Expression and Authoritarian Resilience* (Columbia University Press, 2018); Maria Repnikova and Kecheng Fang, "Authoritarian Participatory Persuasion 2.0: Netizens as Thought Work Collaborators in China," *Journal of Contemporary China* 27, no. 113 (2018): 113, https://doi.org/10.1080/10670564.2018.1458063 ; Zhifan Luo and Muyang Li, "Participatory Censorship: How Online Fandom Community Facilitates Authoritarian Rule," *New Media & Society*, SAGE Publications, August 19, 2022, 14614448221113923, https://doi.org/10.1177/14614448221113923.

[14] Conversations with China experts. See also Rachel E. Stern and Jonathan Hassid, "Amplifying Silence: Uncertainty and Control Parables in Contemporary China," *Comparative Political Studies* 45, no. 10 (2012): 1230–54, https://doi.org/10.1177/0010414011434295; Perry Link, "China: The Anaconda in the Chandelier," The NYRB China Archive, New York Review of Books, November 4, 2002, www.chinafile.com/library/nyrb-china-archive/china-anaconda-chandelier.

[15] Margaret Hillenbrand, *Negative Exposures: Knowing What Not to Know in Contemporary China* (Duke University Press, 2020).

[16] Stern and Hassid, "Amplifying Silence."

[17] Bouwers and Kamerling, *Chinese influence and interference in the Dutch media landscape*.

[18] Daniel Bar-Tal, "Self-Censorship as a Socio-Political-Psychological Phenomenon: Conception and Research," *Political Psychology* 38, no. S1 (2017): 37–65, https://doi.org/10.1111/pops.12391.

[19] Hillenbrand, *Negative Exposures*.

[20] Elisabeth Noelle-Neumann, "The Spiral of Silence a Theory of Public Opinion," *Journal of Communication* 24, no. 2 (1974): 43–51, academic.oup.com/joc/article-abstract/24/2/43/4553587?redirectedFrom=fulltext

[21] Conversation with China scholar working with Tibetan and Uyghur communities in the EU. The conversation highlighted the extreme difficulty to engage conversation about certain topics due to the overall "paranoia" within such communities.

[22] This is also apparent in our own interviews with Chinese diaspora members in Europe.

[23] Henry Chiu Hail, "Patriotism Abroad: Overseas Chinese Studentsa' Encounters With Criticisms of China," *Journal of Studies in International Education* 19, no. 4 (2015): 311–26, https://doi.org/10.1177/1028315314567175.

[24] Peter Hays Gries, *China's New Nationalism: Pride, Politics, and Diplomacy*, Philip E. Lilienthal Books (Paperback) (University of California Press, 2004), https://doi.org/10.1525/9780520931947; Suisheng Zhao, A Nation-State by Construction: Dynamics of Modern Chinese Nationalism (Stanford University Press, 2004), www.loc.gov/catdir/toc/ecip0416/2004006013.html.

[25] Han, *Contesting Cyberspace in China*; Florian Schneider, *China's Digital Nationalism*, Oxford Studies in Digital Politics (Oxford University Press, 2018).

[26] Kecheng Fang and Maria Repnikova, "Demystifying 'Little Pink': The Creation and Evolution of a Gendered Label for Nationalistic Activists in China," *New Media & Society* 20, no. 6 (2018): 2162–85, https://doi.org/10.1177/1461444817731923; Hailong Liu, ed., *From Cyber-Nationalism to Fandom Nationalism: The Case of Diba Expedition In China*, Chinese Perspectives on Journalism and Communication (Routledge, 2019).

[27] Daniel Trottier, "Denunciation and Doxing: Towards a Conceptual Model of Digital Vigilantism," *Global Crime* 21, nos. 3–4 (2020): 196–212, https://doi.org/10.1080/17440572.2019.1591952.

Notes continues:

[28] Multiple of our interviewees for instance indicate that they tend to downplay their positive experiences of living abroad when among friends and family in China, who might interpret it as an indirect criticism of China and China's political system.

[29] Amelia Loi and Mary Zhao, "For Female Journalists, Covering China Comes at a Cost – *Radio Free Asia*," Radio Free Asia, March 20, 2023, www.rfa.org/english/news/china/harassment-03202023133743.html

[30] Conversations with an EU-based WeChat influencer and publicly China scholar. See also Wendy Weile Zhou, "Global China's Pride and Anxiety: Nationalistic Attacks on 'Anti-China Media,'" paper presented at 2025 AAS Annual Conference, Association of Asian Studies, March 14, 2025, https://asianstudies.confex.com/asianstudies/2025/meetingapp.cgi/Paper/14873.

[31] Systematic empirical evidence directly linking diaspora nationalism to patterns of online content circulation remains limited, however, and mostly case-study-based. See, for instance, Luwei Luqiu and Yi Kang, "Loyalty to WeChat beyond National Borders: A Perspective of Media System Dependency Theory on Techno-Nationalism," *Chinese Journal of Communication* 14 (May 2021): 1–18, https://doi.org/10.1080/17544750.2021.1921820; Wanning Sun, "Chinese Diaspora and Social Media: Negotiating Transnational Space," in *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Communication* (2021), https://doi.org/10.1093/acrefore/9780190228613.013.1146; Henry Hail, "Patriotism Abroad: Overseas Chinese Students' Encounters With Criticisms of China," *Journal of Studies in International Education* 19 (January 2015), https://doi.org/10.1177/1028315314567175.

[32] See Ralph Weber, "The Party-State's Global Transgressive Political Activities and Influence Work," in *Routledge Handbook* on Global China, First edition, ed. Maximilian Mayer (Routledge, 2025).

About the ARM Project

Coordinated by the Chr. Michelsen Institute (CMI), the ARM project delves into authoritarian strategies for information control beyond borders. While foreign disinformation receives ample scrutiny, other forms of foreign information manipulation and intervention (FIMI) remain overlooked.

Analysing Russia, China, Ethiopia, and Rwanda, ARM conceptualises and addresses different forms of FIMI. The project will explore the extent that major global players like China and Russia, alongside Ethiopia and Rwanda, engage in transnational information suppression, particularly targeting European diaspora communities.

CONTACT
media@arm-project.eu
@ArmProject_EU
arm-project-eu
arm-project.eu

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