

China's control of information dissemination

To what extent are China's information control practices reflected in the operations of key Chinese media and platforms managed by technology companies headquartered in China? How should the EU respond when these platforms act as media channels, and what does this mean for EU regulation?

Summary

This brief provides a new perspective on the debate about the role of Chinese tech companies in dissemination of information by emphasising **China's understanding of digital services primarily as media channels**. In contrast to the European Union, where platforms and search engines are governed under the Digital Services Act/Digital Markets Act Package as digital services run by private companies, in China digital services are considered applications "having news, public opinion or social mobilisation functions." As such, the digital services themselves, even though run by private companies, are governed under formal and informal rules for public opinion guidance, separated into internal and external propaganda (officially translated as publicity). China's domestic information control practices can help EU policymakers better assess, compare and address information control practices under existing regulatory frameworks.

The European context

Within the European Union (EU) the concept of foreign information manipulation and interference (FIMI) has been key to understand and identify information control

operations. FIMI usually describes deliberate acts by authoritarian states, however this concept overlooks two central aspects: the attribution to state actors and, relatedly, understanding the role of non-state actors. Widening the scope of FIMI to the influence of non-state actors and non-deliberate actions can improve our understanding of how technology platforms and media outlets interfere in European societies.

EU digital policy is built around a process-based regulatory approach. However, this creates blind spots when assessing practices that do not follow EU-norms. Understanding the methods of information control in China and the organisations involved is essential for ensuring existing EU frameworks remain effective.

Key Messages

- China has built up substantial capacity to disseminate information flows abroad
- On Chinese communication channels multiple state and non-state actors are engaged in information control relying on a variety of techniques
- Chinese tech companies are in partnership with the Chinese state
- Platforms managed by Chinese companies constitute an important channel for information dissemination
- Information control practices vary across platforms



Channels for dissemination of information

This section examines the channels through which information is disseminated inside and outside China, focusing on media outlets and digital platforms managed by Chinese technology companies.

Inside China

China's approach towards dissemination of information has become well-known for its Great Chinese Firewall, which limits access to the Global Internet inside China. While such technical barriers for access to information constitute an important measure for information control, one-party regimes like China tend to build institutions that allow them to also deal with the challenge of managing domestic information flows.¹

China is constantly expanding its capacity to control information, mostly through institutional infrastructures such as the Propaganda Department and the Cyberspace Administration. While these institutions seek a roughly uniform flow of political information, they are characterised by fragmentation.

Unlike the EU's process-based approach, promoting for transparency and accountability while preserving media autonomy, Chinese institutions include public administrative bodies that give directives to media regarding the boundaries of information. Under Xi Jinping recentralisation strengthened enforcement of propaganda and public opinion work, but did not overcome fragmentation inherent in the Chinese political system,² with tensions between ministries and bureaus remaining.³ As a result, information control in practice involves multiple state and non-state actors using diverse techniques.

Techniques of information control

China employs a range of information control techniques, from over censorship to more subtle, indirect practices.

- **Censorship:** Deletion of content or accounts
- **Friction and flooding:** Increasing the cost of locating reliable information⁴
- **Doxing:** Public disclosure of personal information by third actors

These techniques are not always directly linked to the state. Flooding, Friction, and Doxing are often initiated by volunteers pursuing their own goals rather than part of a deliberate state information control strategy. As a result, information control inside China is not homogenous, but instead varies over time, regionally, by topic and communication channel.⁵

¹ Daniela Stockmann, *Media Commercialization and Authoritarian Rule in China*, 1st ed. (Cambridge University Press, 2012), <https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9781139087742>

² Daniela Stockmann and Ting Luo, "Xi Jinping's Partnership with Technology Companies and Social Media Platforms," in *Chinese Politics*, 2nd ed. (Routledge, 2024).

³ Rogier Creemers, "Cyber China: Upgrading Propaganda, Public Opinion Work and Social Management for the Twenty-First Century," *Journal of Contemporary China* 26, no. 103 (2017): 85–100, <https://doi.org/10.1080/10670564.2016.1206281>

⁴ *Friction* refers to filters that divert attention of individuals towards other issues. *Flooding* refers to flooding the cyberspace with distracting or biased information.

⁵ For variation on topics and issues, please see separate policy brief on salience.

Periods of information control

Information control intensifies during politically sensitive periods, including:

- **Spring festival and national people's political consultative conference in Beijing**
- **Chinese New Year**, when there is less space for public criticism
- **Moments of instability**, such as leadership changes, economic slowdowns, or crises (e.g. The COVID pandemic)

Regional differences of information control

Access to information varies geographically:

- Urban areas tend to have greater access to the Internet and more autonomous media compared to rural areas.
- Provinces – regardless of development level – had about the same access to the Internet as of 2018.⁶

Differences of information control across media channels

Levels of control differ significantly across media platforms:

- Television is the most tightly controlled medium, followed by radio broadcasting, newspapers, magazines, online news websites, and the Internet
- Across newspapers and the Internet there remain considerable differences

Online the most tightly controlled websites are those of political institutions which see engagement from around 5% of Internet users.

For political information the most important channels are WeChat which is used by 99% Internet users. Among this group 73% consume or produce political information. Besides WeChat, news websites (43%) and QQ (25%) remain important alternative channels. While platform popularity is important in terms of reach, some platforms disproportionately reach certain segments of society that are considered potentially destabilising. In this regard Sina Weibo remains influential, with about 10% of Internet users engage with political information there.⁷ As illustrated in the box, these companies are publicly traded companies run for profit.

⁶ Daniela Stockmann and Ting Luo, "Surveying Internet Users in China: Comparing Representative Survey Data with Official Statistics," *The China Quarterly* 262 (June 2025): 531–47, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0305741025000177>

⁷ Stockmann and Luo, *Governing Digital China*.

Technology companies providing key social media platforms inside China

Tencent

Tencent holds a monopoly with its platforms WeChat and QQ. Founded in 1998 and headquartered in Shenzhen Tencent and listed on the Hong Kong Stock Exchange. As of July 2025 Tencent's estimated market capitalization reached \$573.36 billion, ranking it 17th in the world's most valuable company list.

Sina

Sina was founded in 1999 and is known for its Chinese language-infotainment web portal Sina.com, serving populations around the world and the above mentioned Sina Weibo. Sina has been listed on the New York Stock Exchange as a standalone social media company since 2014 and on the Hong Kong Stock Exchange since 2021. As of 2025 Sina remains the largest shareholder of Sinca Weibo, holding 35,9 percent, followed by Alibaba with a share of 27,7 percent.

Although technology companies are often presumed to be dominated by the state, empirical evidence reveals a partnership. The Chinese state can employ coercion and financial incentives to shape the behavior of these firms, but it lacks the expertise to independently craft and drive digital innovation at scale. With the state trying to grow the digital economy while also keeping the political system stable, it has developed a solution by partnering with technology companies to promote digital development. This partnership is both cooperative and contentious. Companies seek to maximise profits without pushing for political liberalization, while the state prioritises control and stability.

Companies leverage their insider and consultancy status with government bodies to negotiate greater space for political discourse and resist the state's user data-sharing demands.⁸ When companies become too influential, the state reasserts control through coercive measures such as penalties issued during the anti-trust campaign. For example after Jack Ma's speech in 2020 – in which he placed himself and the company above Xi Jinping and the state – the government cracked down on Alibaba, as well as Tencent and Sina.⁹ Although the anti-trust campaign reduced insider status, state dependency on technology firms continues to exist.

Outside China

While domestic information control focuses on topics relevant to political stability, external propaganda concentrates on shaping the image of China abroad (see policy brief on salience). The most important dissemination channels are explained below:

China's international media outlets

China's international media outlets are central to external propaganda and the dissemination of information abroad. China Daily, Xinhua, CCTV and CRI are registered directly under a state unit and often receive financial state subsidies or other preferential treatment. These outlets

⁸ Stockmann and Luo, *Governing Digital China*.

⁹ Stockmann and Luo, *Governing Digital China*.

are considered mouthpieces to establish “initiatives and operation planning, show motivation and demonstrate a correct understanding of the policy instructions issued by the state”.

In practice, these outlets hire local European staff in order to stay on top of up-to-date reporting, however when stories refer to China's image or interests in EU countries they are likely to apply a state-directed perspective.

Xinhua News Agency

The most significant outlet in this context is the Xinhua News Agency. Despite changing its legal status in 2003 from a “state news agency” to a Company Limited, Xinhua is well placed in the Chinese government apparatus (Figure 1).¹¹ By publishing in several languages and across several news outlets, its mission is to “present China to the world” and provide state perspectives on international affairs.¹²

Xinhua is registered under the state council, with external propaganda handled by the State Council Information Office (SCIO).¹³ Key responsibilities include setting information control guidelines and instruments; observing foreign media; and taking part in guidance of domestic media, including the internet.¹⁴

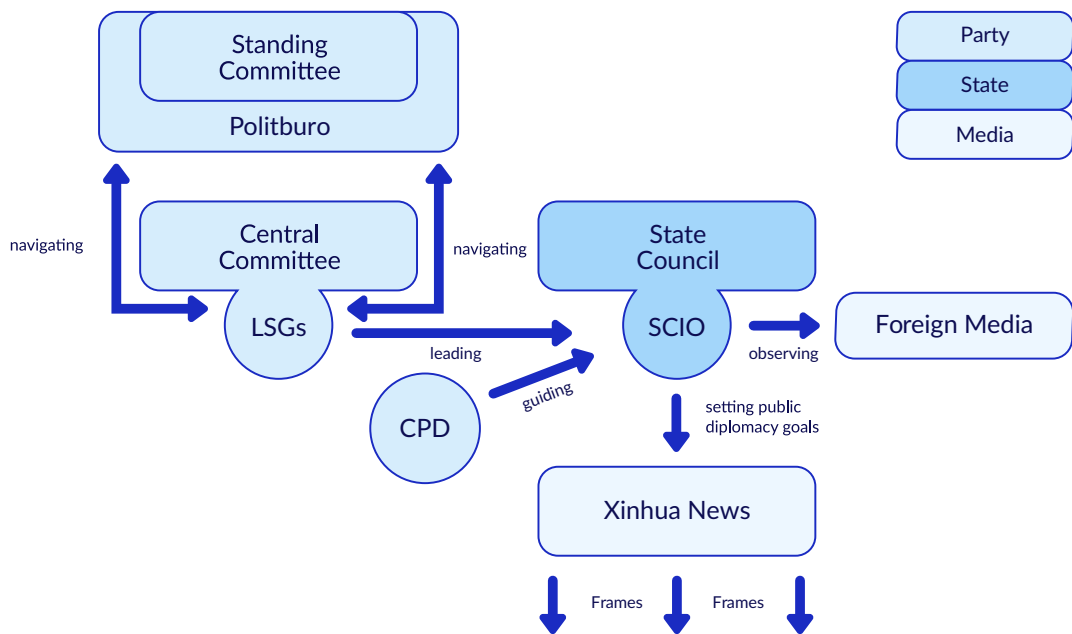


Figure 1. “China's control over Xinhua News Agency”, Own illustration.

¹¹ M. Ohlberg, “Creating a Favorable International Public Opinion Environment: External Propaganda (Duiwai Xuanchuan) as a Global Concept with Chinese Characteristics” (University of Heidelberg, 2014), <https://archiv.ub.uni-heidelberg.de/volltextserver/17289/>

¹² S. Custer et al., *Ties That Bind: Managing China's Public Diplomacy and Its “Good Neighbour” Effect* (VA. AidData at William & Mary, 2018).

¹³ Ohlberg, “Creating a Favorable International Public Opinion Environment: External Propaganda (Duiwai Xuanchuan) as a Global Concept with Chinese Characteristics.”

¹⁴ Ingrid d’Hooghe, “Chapter 4: China's Public Diplomacy System,” in *China's Public Diplomacy*, by Ingrid d’Hooghe (Brill, 2014), https://doi.org/10.1163/9789004283954_006

Despite operating abroad, Xinhua is embedded into China's political system and is subject to the same mechanisms that manage media outlined earlier. On the ground Xinhua might have some flexibility, but the government structure clearly prevents it from acting as an independent media outlet abroad.

China's international tech companies

Although Chinese tech companies are not just extensions of the state, they remain an important channel for information dissemination. China's international digitalisation strategy, the Digital Silk Road (DSR), shows that Chinese digital platforms operating abroad are not only providing technology, but also exporting an authoritarian version of data governance that includes specific non-democratic values and practices.¹⁵

The "PRC Users"

- Digital platforms expand data and privacy laws beyond China's national jurisdiction to Chinese nationals.
- "PRC Users" who run the service in Mandarin Chinese (as opposed to other languages) are thus subject to the different Terms of Services than non-PRC users.

The regulatory context in which these platforms operate is therefore crucial. Within the EU, platforms run by Chinese technology companies are subject to a process-based approach that emphasises greater transparency, public responsibility, and accountability.¹⁶ Table 1 below shows the extent that these companies implement China's censorship criteria within the EU¹⁷ moderating content, just like all other platforms. However, Chinese information control also leaks into these channels to varying degrees, reflecting the extraterritorial influence of Chinese legal and governance frameworks.

¹⁵ Daniela Stockmann et al., "Who Is a PRC User? Comparing Chinese Social Media User Agreements," First Monday, ahead of print, July 22, 2020, <https://doi.org/10.5210/fm.v25i8.10319>. Felix Garten, "Hierarchical Networks in Finance and Trade: How Do Digital Platforms Shape Foreign Markets?," in Dissertations Submitted to the Hertie School; 05/2025 (Hertie School, 2025), application/pdf, 2185 KB, vi, 124 pages, <https://doi.org/10.48462/OPUS4-5806>

¹⁶ Anu Bradford, *Digital Empires: The Global Battle to Regulate Technology*, 1st ed. (Oxford University Press New York, 2023), <https://doi.org/10.1093/oso/9780197649268.001.0001>

¹⁷ For a more detailed analysis of the cases mentioned in Table 1, please refer to our Working Paper.

Table 1: Overview of China's dissemination control channels inside EU

Platform	INFORMATION CONTROL
AliExpress	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Limited visibility of products related to Tiananmen and rainbow flags¹⁸
TikTok¹⁹	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Limited visibility of posts by users it identified as belonging to vulnerable groups (such as LGBTQ+) In Germany, shadow-banning content related to LGBTQ+, internment camps, and the Chinese tennis player Peng Shuai
WeChat	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Signals to video producers when content is considered as sensitive Systematic removals and filtering of politically sensitive content, including historical events and state criticism on public accounts Politically sensitive content exchanged between overseas accounts is monitored and used to train and reinforce WeChat's censorship mechanism applied to China-registered users
Xiaohongshu	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Sensitive political terms and related expressions of political content are consistently filtered or controlled
DeepSeek²⁰	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Models are trained and finetuned on data that amplifies perspectives and reproduces stances that result in information control Final answers of web service are censored by key-word based filters

¹⁸ Our preliminary evidence suggests that a combination of information control and market dynamics may be at work (see also our working paper).

¹⁹ While research shows that TikTok engages in information control, more research is needed to clarify whether this relates to China-specific information control or whether it can be observed across platforms (including non-Chinese platforms).

²⁰ While research shows that DeepSeek engages in information control, more research is needed to show whether this is also the case for US-American platforms.



When developing policies:

- **Treat Chinese technology companies as media and non-state actors**
- **Acknowledge that Chinese technology companies and the Chinese state are in partnership with each other**
- **Assess regulatory options preventing Chinese platforms from operating “PRC User” versions within the EU**
- **Enforce Digital Services Act Data Access provisions to allow for systematic comparison of information control practices between Chinese and non-Chinese platforms**
- **Provide more funding for comparative research on Chinese and US-American technology companies**

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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.

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