

Can Public Diplomacy Survive Increasing U.S.-China Friction? Thoughts on Mitigating the Threat of Sharp Power

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“The best weapon of a dictatorship is secrecy, but the best weapon of a democracy should be the weapon of openness.”

—Niels Bohr

A decade ago, the U.S. and China were seeking stronger public diplomacy ties through programs like the 100,000 Strong Initiative. Yet in the contemporary political environment, it is unclear that even U.S.-China public diplomacy will survive the antagonism simmering between the two countries. Amidst a backdrop of rising U.S.-China tensions, a number of difficult challenges have emerged given the potential vulnerability of U.S. democratic institutions to influence from China and other authoritarian states. Wary of the potential effects of language- and culture-focused Confucius Institutes on academic freedom and public perceptions, Congress has launched in-depth investigations, and the State Department has mandated greater information-sharing about these programs and their operations.¹ Concerned about the influence of state-controlled media outlets on American news consumers, federal investigators and national security leaders first required several Chinese print and broadcast outlets to register under the Foreign Agents Registration Act (FARA) and then subsequently declared them foreign missions.² Incensed by the contradictory activity of Chinese officials on Western social media platforms banned in mainland China and worried about disinformation, scholars have called for the shutdown of official Chinese social media accounts.³

Central to each of these issues is the potential for malign influence on the U.S. public. Though public diplomacy instruments such as the ones mentioned above have traditionally been viewed as benign, concerns about Chinese “sharp power” have brought them under greater political scrutiny.⁴ However, it is important to remember that while legitimate threats to America’s vibrant democracy do exist, absolutist maneuvers that disaffirm our liberal values also threaten our democratic institutions.

America’s strength is its openness. In order for such a truth to persist, it will be important to manage the threat posed by public diplomacy from influence-seeking authoritarian states such as China by pursuing four main policy goals, namely: (1) comprehensive monitoring of the tools of public influence employed by these states; (2) a well-informed citizenry; (3) an information environment in which knowledge consumers have access to details about the origins of narratives and news; and (4) a values-based approach to confronting authoritarian outreach to the U.S. public. Pursuing such goals should allow the United States to exercise the appropriate caution to ward off unwanted exploitation of its openness while also staying true to its ideals.

The Dilemma of Chinese Public Diplomacy

As China gains greater geopolitical status, the Chinese government has increasingly sought to strengthen its international influence through a range of measures targeted at foreign publics. Some of these actions are undeniably malign. For example, since the onset of the global COVID-19 pandemic, China has ratcheted up its disinformation operations significantly.⁵ In many cases, these efforts have been covert. For instance, in April 2020, agents from the People's Republic of China (PRC) were implicated in a scheme to amplify text chains intended to sow confusion and rouse panic by spreading fabricated information and conspiracy theories about the virus.⁶ Stories of Chinese influence campaigns targeting prominent elites in countries like Australia and the UK⁷ and incidents involving intellectual property theft by Chinese researchers and academics⁸ are other examples of the “gray zone” influence techniques currently being used by the PRC.

But unlike covert influence operations, Chinese public diplomacy operates out in the open. Through the term “public diplomacy,” I mean to reference government-sponsored engagement with foreign publics that is overt in nature—from educational programs to exchanges to transnational news publications. Consider, for example, the incident in September 2018 when the Chinese state-run *China Daily* bought a four-page insert in the Sunday edition of Iowa's *Des Moines Register*.⁹ The lead article featured a bolded title in all-caps: “DUEL UNDERMINES BENEFITS OF TRADE.” Furthermore, a key sentence read, “On Aug. 9, Han Jun, vice-minister of agriculture and rural affairs, described China and the U.S. as ‘strongly complementary in agricultural trade,’ but he warned that Trump’s trade war may force China to look for alternative partners, and once that is done, U.S. farmers may find it hard to regain their market share in China.” Both Vice President Mike Pence and President Donald Trump lambasted the newspaper feature, accusing China of inserting itself into the 2018 election cycle.¹⁰ China had certainly narrowed in on a key constituency in the midterm elections. Farmers make up a large proportion of Iowa voters, and competition was ramping up in areas like Iowa's 3rd congressional district, where Democratic challenger Cindy Axne was hoping to unseat the Republican incumbent, David Young.¹¹

Moreover, September 2018 was a frustrating time for Iowa farmers. Producers of soybeans—one of the largest agricultural products in the state—were particularly hard-pressed. It was the beginning of the fall harvest, and the U.S. Department of Agriculture had just released a promising forecast for soybean yields for the season. But as farmers made plans for reaping and threshing their crops, the prospects for revenue were looking dim. Soybean farmers were big losers in the escalating trade war with China, the world leader in soybean purchases. After being hit with retaliatory tariffs from Beijing, U.S. soybeans had lost about 20 percent of their value. Just a week before the *China Daily* article was published, a news report by the Iowa Soybean Association had quoted its former president, farmer Mark Jackson, saying: “Given the current trade issues, I’m assuming supplies will build and prices will remain low. It could be a long winter.”¹²

The *China Daily* placement was politically motivated, and its messaging was calibrated to affect a particularly hard-hit constituency. Nevertheless, all of China's actions in this episode were legal, even routine. Since 1983, the *China Daily* has been registered with the Department of Justice (DOJ) under FARA. According to FARA, “agents of foreign principals in a political or quasi-political capacity” may operate in the United States as long as they follow certain procedures to label their information appropriately and to allow the U.S. government to monitor and track their activities. In fact, the practice of government-sponsored, transnational news placement is nothing new. A number of governments around the world have been creating media content for foreign publics for a long time, be it through international broadcasters or foreign-facing print outlets and news websites.

Still, the propagation of Chinese state-controlled media in the U.S. is uncomfortable to some. In recent years, it has raised a number of important questions. When is a foreign government-sponsored news report fair, and when is it overly biased? Should all foreign news outlets be allowed to place pieces in local papers—even if they are state-controlled and lack editorial freedom? How will a country's posture toward news, information, and propaganda at home affect the message that it promotes abroad? Similar questions emerge when considering other Chinese public diplomacy initiatives, such as educating American youth through Confucius Institutes and publishing self-aggrandizing articles via U.S. social media platforms.

Foreign Missions: A Trumpian Innovation

The Trump administration has developed a unique response to Chinese public diplomacy organs. Since February 2020, the State Department has labeled nine Chinese news organizations, including the *China Daily*, Xinhua News Agency, the China Global Television Network, and the *Global Times*, as foreign missions, meaning they must adhere to the same administrative requirements mandated for foreign embassies and consulates.¹³ Similarly, in August 2020, the State Department labeled the Confucius Institute U.S. Center (CIUS) as a foreign mission.¹⁴

While these designations have clearly sent a message to the Chinese government—perhaps resembling the U.S. waving a massive “don’t tread on me” flag—these measures alone will not fully address the larger challenge that America is facing. The foreign mission designation is rarely applied to non-diplomatic outposts. In the short term, these designations may forge greater inroads for monitoring Chinese public diplomacy organs in the United States. However, in the long term, if only applied to Chinese entities, the designations will fail to address similar activities by other authoritarian actors. Furthermore, these actions cannot substitute for a strategic approach to rethinking the U.S. posture toward authoritarian public diplomacy institutions, nor will they address the need to more adequately prepare the U.S. public to be resilient to challenges from foreign influence attempts in the future.

Four Key Steps for the Era Ahead

Overt, run-of-the-mill public diplomacy as performed by China need not be made into a ten-foot boogeyman. In many cases, the significant differences in the political culture between the United States and China will be enough to preclude ideological influence. Indeed, my own research on the effects of Confucius Classrooms in American schools shows that even young high schoolers are able to process conflicting signals in their learning environment: though the students in my study were participating in Chinese-sponsored language programs, their views of China became more complicated—and overall, more negative—over the course of the school year.¹⁵ Spending too much time trying to shut these or other public diplomacy programs down may distract from the important work of implementing policy measures that will more effectively safeguard U.S. democratic institutions from the practically inevitable challenges in the information domain that our country will continue to face in today’s globally and technologically networked world.

Monitoring

The “foreign missions” designations recently made by the State Department appear to be motivated at improving reporting standards and transparency of the operations of Chinese public diplomacy actors in the United States. In-depth information about the operations of state-sponsored actors in the U.S. will be important moving forward. It will help the U.S. government stay abreast of what types of activities these actors are engaged in, and it will also aid in the process of identifying attempts at covert activities that go beyond the scope of public diplomacy. In instances where evidence of coercion, espionage, or illegal activity emerges, the appropriate legal and national security measures should be taken to quickly address them.

In addition, the U.S. will need to come up with a more comprehensive strategy for handling public diplomacy as implemented by China and other countries of concern. One avenue for such monitoring might be to better equip the Department of Justice to address public diplomacy actors through FARA. Beyond Chinese outlets, the Justice Department has ordered other state-controlled media, including Russian outlets like Sputnik and Russia Today (RT) and, most recently, Qatar’s Al-Jazeera, to register as foreign agents.¹⁶

As the Justice Department begins to apply FARA more widely to foreign news agencies, a number of shortcomings have become clear. Some worry about its impact on journalistic practices. An August 2017 Atlantic Council report advocated for foreign agent registration of Russia’s RT but cited several weaknesses of FARA itself, including limited scope, poor oversight, and infrequent enforcement.¹⁷

Moreover, how foreign agents interpret FARA rules seems to vary. For example, the legislation includes guidelines for labeling informational materials.¹⁸ Some outlets follow them well. For example, when *China Daily* printed its insert in September, a clear disclaimer that read that it “was paid for and prepared solely by *China Daily*, an official publication of the People’s Republic of China” appeared under the main header. Other outlets require more digging. RT America’s “About Us” page on its website begins with an extensive explanation about the outlet’s availability in “more than 100 countries spanning five continents” and how it “creates news with an edge for viewers who want to Question More.” Readers must scroll to the very bottom of the page to see that it “is an autonomous, non-profit organization that is publicly financed from the budget of the Russian Federation.”

The Justice Department has already recognized the need to beef up FARA enforcement and has made some recent efforts to do so.¹⁹ Moreover, several members of Congress have made attempts to adapt FARA’s mandate to more directly address foreign media outlets.²⁰ It would be prudent to accelerate efforts to revitalize FARA. During that process, the questions of how to create a more sustainable model for monitoring interactive public diplomacy programs (like the Confucius Institutes) and whether these programs might also be addressed by FARA should also be resolved.

Educating the American Public

Too often, Americans unwittingly share false or heavily biased information disseminated by state actors, thus aiding those actors in building their American audience. If these Americans knew that the news they were forwarding came from a state-controlled media source, they might be less likely to send it in the first place. In order to address this issue, we will need to better prepare our citizens to understand the complex information landscape of the present. Nationwide media literacy programs in K-12 schools would be a good start.²¹ These programs would educate young people about how to evaluate an information source, how to determine whether information published by a source is credible, and how to cross-reference other sources for the purpose of verification. In doing so, they would also help with the equally—if not more—threatening challenge of domestic political disinformation circulating on many U.S. media platforms.

Similarly, many states across the country lack sufficiently thorough global education standards for K-12 schools. If students learn about global issues and are trained to monitor current events at a young age, they will be less susceptible to unsubstantiated or biased information promoted through public diplomacy programs organized by countries of concern.

Mandated Labeling of State-Sponsored Information

As mentioned above, FARA-mandated labeling of sources requires some level of attestation on products from registered foreign agents. However, these labels are not included when posts from state-run media channels show up in most Americans’ social media feeds.

This trend is slowly changing due to innovations by a number of technology companies. In 2018, YouTube implemented a policy requiring that videos uploaded by news broadcasters receiving government funding carry a disclaimer.²² When viewers access videos on RT America’s YouTube page, a banner under the video screen reads, “RT is funded in whole or in part by the Russian government.” On YouTube, regardless of whether the content comes from the BBC or RT, users will get a disclaimer. Additionally, this summer, Facebook began labeling state-controlled media on its platform in cases when media outlets are “wholly or partially under the editorial control of their government.”²³ So far, the platform has marked a subset of pages—many of which are sponsored by China and Russia. However, on both YouTube and Facebook, some notable state-run outlets remain unlabeled.²⁴

In a world getting smaller by the day, it is important to empower the American people to make more informed decisions about information sources. Rather than leaving the labeling of foreign government information to the outlets themselves and limiting requirements to those designated as foreign agents, it would be a good idea for the

U.S. government to require notifications of foreign government sponsorship for all internet content. Placing the onus on the social media company rather than the foreign news outlet itself would make visible labeling more likely. Technology companies have limited resources for sourcing, so it should not be expected that they will prioritize comprehensive labeling schemes without political pressure.

Doubling Down on American Values

Finally, it will be important to remember that American global leadership is advanced by adherence to our values. If we become so worried about foreign exploitation of our openness that we veer sharply toward the censorship and control characteristic of authoritarians, we will only do ourselves more harm.

A values-driven approach centered on liberal democratic norms, transparency, freedom of expression, and freedom of access to information should underlie all forward-looking U.S. action in the realm of public engagement. By doubling down on these values and projecting them intentionally, the U.S. will build democratic institutions more impervious to foreign exploitation.

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¹ On Confucius Institutes in the United States, see, for example, "China's Impact on the U.S. Education System," United States Senate Permanent Subcommittee on Investigations Committee on Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs, February 27, 2019, <https://www.hsgac.senate.gov/imo/media/doc/PSI%20Report%20China's%20Impact%20on%20the%20US%20Education%20System.pdf>. On declaring the Confucius Institute of the United States a foreign mission, see Michael R. Pompeo, "Designation of the Confucius Institute U.S. Center as a Foreign Mission of the PRC," August 13, 2020, <https://www.state.gov/designation-of-the-confucius-institute-u-s-center-as-a-foreign-mission-of-the-prc/>.

² For more information, see Megan R. Wilson, "Russian News Outlet Sputnik Registers with DOJ as Foreign Agent," *The Hill*, November 17, 2017, <https://thehill.com/business-a-lobbying/business-a-lobbying/360912-russian-news-outlet-sputnik-registers-with-doj-as>; Kate O'Keefe and Aruna Viswanatha, "Justice Department Has Ordered Key Chinese State Media Firms to Register as Foreign Agents," *The Wall Street Journal*, September 18, 2018, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/justice-department-has-ordered-key-chinese-state-media-firms-to-register-as-foreign-agents-1537296756>; and Morgan Ortagus (Department Spokesperson), "Designation of Additional Chinese Media Entities as Foreign Missions," United States Department of State Press Release, June 22, 2020, <https://www.state.gov/designation-of-additional-chinese-media-entities-as-foreign-missions/>.

³ Scholars from the Stanford Internet Observatory advocated in a *Washington Post* op-ed that Chinese state actors be banned from Western social media platforms that are not allowed in China. See Vanessa Molter, Renee DiResta, and Alex Stamos, "As Chinese Propaganda on Covid-19 Grows, U.S. Social Media Must Act," *The Washington Post*, April 27, 2020, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/2020/04/27/chinese-propaganda-covid-19-grows-us-social-media-must-act/>.

⁴ Researchers at the National Endowment for Democracy coined the phrase "sharp power" in a December 2017 report. See "'Sharp Power: Rising Authoritarian Influence': New Forum Report," National Endowment for Democracy, December 5, 2017, <https://www.ned.org/sharp-power-rising-authoritarian-influence-forum-report/>.

⁵ For more information, see Jessica Brandt and Torrey Taussig, "The Kremlin's Disinformation Playbook Goes to Beijing," *The Brookings Institution*, May 19, 2020, <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/order-from-chaos/2020/05/19/the-kremlins-disinformation-playbook-goes-to-beijing/>; and Joshua Kurlantzick, "How China Ramped up Disinformation Efforts during the Pandemic," Council on Foreign Relations, September 10, 2020, <https://www.cfr.org/in-brief/how-china-ramped-disinformation-efforts-during-pandemic>.

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