

Information and Disinformation in the 21st Century

“In the new century, liberty will spread by cell phone and cable modem,” said Bill Clinton in the early 2000s. Circa 2022, Clinton and his Washington counterparts could simply not foresee the paradox in such a statement — both domestically and abroad. The Oxford dictionary defines **information** as *knowledge communicated concerning some particular fact, subject, or event*; while **disinformation** is *the dissemination of false information which is intended to mislead, especially propaganda*. Disinformation deliberately falsifies and manipulates the content and context, and in turn authenticates fiction. The camps between the two words seem relatively straightforward and binary, but in reality, inferring the difference between the two is becoming an increasingly foggy process.

This pattern is visible within the political and societal ecosystems of both China and the US, who both face issues related to disinformation. Some may argue deception is inherent to politics. A catalyst, however, to the rising global disinformation campaign has been the internet, which has made the spread of false information easier, cheaper, and wider-reaching. This has proven to dangerously influence public perception. Across the world, alongside the newer forms of internet and social media, we see increasing evidence of individuals, groups, and authorities nationalising individual feelings through narratives distorted as genuine “information”. Liberty has not spread through technological means as Clinton had predicted — much to the contrary, disinformation, polarization, and suspicion has.

Whether it is Fox News galvanizing the thinking of America’s Trump supporters’ animosity towards the “radical left” or Beijing’s State organ CCTV pushing stories of “Western meddling” in domestic Chinese affairs. Such news sources establish definitive camps of ‘good’ and ‘bad’, forming the quintessential fairytale, rigged with protagonists and antagonists. Akin to narrational plots, these stories are almost always exaggerated and arrayed with a bias to sway public opinion. Analyzing **the root, the response, and the result** of these disinformation developments in both nations is imperative in order to address some of the wider hybrid conflicts at stake in the two countries’ internal and external contemporary affairs.

The Root

The cause of disinformation in both countries sits at opposite ends of the spectrum. For China’s internet platform, disinformation is the causal result of authoritative censorship and a *lack* of freedom, whilst for America’s online ecosystem, disinformation is an entwined implication of *boundless* freedoms. In China, the creation of a sovereign, ordered, and territorial unity is paramount; indeed, for millennia, this has validated the morality of a strong and centralized rule in China. This central apprehension to chaos guides China’s leadership today and is a prerequisite for the Party’s survival. Domestically, this provides a convenient imprimatur for all types of behaviour the Party deems as ‘disorderly’ and paradoxically legitimizes State control over avenues such as

power over information. Orwell rightly noted that the further a society drifts from the truth, the more it will hate those that speak it.

In contrast, for the US and other modern democracies, freedom forms the core in which order then surrounds. Americans generally valorize the First Amendment of the US Constitution as protecting freedom of speech without limits, which eliminates any restrictions on speech — be it genuine information or corrosive disinformation. Anyone prone to mistrusting an election result or a vaccine will hunt out or overvalue corroborating news. For there to be stability in China, information must be selected; for there to be freedom in the US, information has the right to be shared. In both processes, this leads to an amalgamation of disinformation.

A tree with just one apple gives you a single option to harvest — be it good or bad. A tree flourishing with 100 apples gives you a hundred choices to pick. But suppose a few in the mix of the latter tree are toxic apples — then you run risk of poison in what was otherwise deemed a good tree. This has happened in both autocracies and democracies; whilst the former has a single, state-constructed narrative that is more often bound to disinformation, the latter also runs the intense risk of uncensored over-information, including portions of disinformation. Flooding people with too much information in democracies can be just as distorting as the internet censorship imposed in many authoritarian states. In both cases, the information's author often has their own agenda as its foremost priority. The digitalization of media revives sensory interpretations of events, making information processing inherently emotional. This gives power to the informant to manipulate emotion through what may seem factual.

The Response

In the new century, China has over 989 million internet users, over 70% of the population are active internet users, and over 94% of juveniles are online. For the Chinese government, regulating the information that is publicly available alongside injecting the Party's own state-narrative leads to disinformation. With near-absolute control over education, the media, and the internet, the CCP can immediately modify the public narrative presented to the people. Akin to the physical wall constructed by their Qin dynasty counterparts, a digital firewall now stands to keep barbarians from interfering and alleviating the risk of Chinese citizens protesting online. Under the firewall, many Western websites are actively blocked — Facebook, Google, the BBC, YouTube, to name but a few. This scope of restrictions artificially shapes the *types* of conversations conducted online. It creates room for state-affiliated websites and news agencies to monopolize media conduits in modern China. The Party's media arteries — CCTV, Xinhua, China Daily, Global Times and their numerous subsidiaries — feed disinformation and propaganda to a citizenry increasingly cut off from the global web.

Furthermore, China draws on millions of citizens to monitor the internet and influence public opinion online. In May 2020, a BBC investigation found hundreds of fake or hijacked social media accounts promoting pro-China narratives, whereby some 1,200 accounts targeted people critical of how Beijing was handling the pandemic. Fear also works to preserve what may otherwise be legitimate information in China. Chinese journalists are confronted by the expurgating of material or works that deviate from the Party line, consequently forming more partisan narrations of current affairs. For example, events ranging from the Tiananmen Square Crackdown of 1989 to nationalist campaigns in China's autonomous regions remain closely censored or outright restricted online.

In 2021, the United States had over 302 million internet users. Disinformation is rife on American outlets which is a byproduct of the democratization of the internet — it is difficult to regulate disinformation in the US without igniting debates of infringements on free speech. In America, the lure of the internet stood in its ability to bypass hierarchical gatekeepers such as governments, publishers and traditional media. However, following in suit came the numerous malevolent actors, from saboteurs abroad to QAnon conspiracists, who manipulated this platform to spread disinformation and hate speech. They push their disinformation through the colossal internet monopolies — from Facebook to Twitter — who have for years made their billions in value amounted not from showcasing reliable information but on virality, clicks, and engagement.

And then arrived the captain of the disinformation boat. In 2016, America's newly elected President Donald Trump's PR campaign was rooted in a movement of calling out “fake news” — a term Trump used to describe any news, however legitimate or responsible, with which he might have disagreed. So prevalent was the term “fake news” spreading through the US and the wider world during Trump's first year in the Oval office that dictionary.com added an entry for it in 2017. Under Trump, the distinction between information and disinformation plundered, sparking serious political ramifications that shook the nation beyond his presidency. The regulators committed to halting Trump's disinformation campaign came not from higher authorities, but instead the ordinary netizens demanding Twitter to deactivate his account. It is beyond imagination that the Chinese people would be able to pressurize Weibo into suspending the account of Xi Jinping.

The Result

The result of these disinformation campaigns on China and the US take the following forms: in China, it fortifies collective contemporary Chinese nationalism whilst in the US, it has led to hyper-partisan dismissal of truth that has factionalized numerous polarizing camps across the country.

In China, highlighting the US's ‘disinformation’ has strengthened in-group nationalism and exacerbated hostilities, fears, and blame towards external powers — often the “meddling West”. International calls to address human rights abuses in Xinjiang have been labelled by the Chinese

state as “malicious baseless lies within the US used to humiliate China”; the Party organ *China Daily* cited the Wuhan lab leak theories as “utter fiction”; and US government accusations that Moscow requested military aid from China during the Ukraine war were dismissed as “total disinformation”. Internally, media outlets cite Western disinformation as a tool used to undermine both the Chinese State and its people — a narrative that parallels the foreign-orchestrated historical humiliation China has faced since the Opium Wars.

This narrative, formed through merging concealed home-grown disinformation with accusations of Western disinformation campaigns, solidifies China’s in-group mentality against foreign foes criticising the Communist Party. Filtered through the CCP lens, the Chinese population have experienced a relentless torrent of maltreatment and criticism from the West that requires defending. A 2018 Chinese survey found that 90% of the post-1990s cohort expressed resentment over “prejudices” in the West about China. Cornell University’s Jessica Chen Weiss has observed that young Chinese people today are “more hawkish in their foreign policy beliefs than older generations”.

For the US, disinformation campaigns have similarly fortified in-group mentalities, but this has polarized both the international outlook and the domestic in-look. Millions of American’s started the new decade of 2020 in disarray over the career appointment of one individual: Joe Biden. During the pandemic, mask-wearing and vaccines, areas of once-thought medical concern, mutated into political skirmishes. A June 2018 poll by Axios and Survey Monkey found that 72% of Americans believe that traditional news outlets knowingly report false or misleading stories at least sometimes.

Where is the inflection point in which disinformation in the US and China ultimately impact foreign relations between the two powers? When the polarization between two groups reaches the point that each side regards the other as morally or politically intolerable, and an existential threat to their country’s future, cohesion is at risk. This has been happening over the past decade within both the US and China. The US has reached a historically divided and negative public opinion on China. Pew Research shows that roughly 90% of US adults consider China to be a competitor or enemy, rather than a partner. Interestingly too, Republicans have long accused the Democrat Party of being too soft on Beijing. Meanwhile, an Economist report noted that Chinese students were increasingly holding more favourable opinions of their own regime alongside less positive ones of democracy and free markets. It is a hate triangle of 3 actors: China against the US; the US against China; and politicians within the US against other politicians within the US who they claim panda-hug Beijing too tightly. Leading British journalist Gideon Rachman has remarked this as a new form of “hybrid warfare” — where information and opinion are all part of the battle.

Closing Remarks

Polluted information ecosystems pose long term challenges to both the US and China. For the US, the sheer availability of unregulated platforms to share bottom-up ‘information’ prohibits the ability to regulate genuine information from disinformation. This is creating a society with increasingly suspicious and polarized views towards any outliers of their group — be it domestic counterparts or foreign foes. Meanwhile in China, top-down hegemony over information limits, censors, and projects it according to the narrative of the Communist Party. This expels information that sits against the CCPs interests and endorses other sources and stories that align with the Party. Glimpsed through the average computer screen in Hangzhou or Houston, the world is becoming increasingly fractured into the starkest blacks and whites. One of the biggest dangers confronting both the US and China is that information lies in the keyboard of the beholder.