

Submission to the Select Committee on Foreign Interference through Social Media

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About us

China Policy Centre is an independent, non-profit research organisation based in Canberra. We aim to inform and promote public discussion and policy debate on China issues. The authors of this submission both have extensive experience working on China issues across government and academia, including on China's foreign and security policy, political economy, and foreign influence and interference activities.

This submission addresses China's foreign interference efforts through social media and offers recommendations for an Australian response.

Recommendations

1. Prioritise China in Australia's strategy addressing the challenges of foreign interference through social media.
2. Increase government outreach to Chinese-Australian communities.
3. Increase Australian Government support for digital media literacy.
4. Consistently articulate and demonstrate the importance of freedom of speech.
5. Upgrade Australia's analytical capabilities on China's foreign influence, interference, propaganda, and misinformation operations.

Prioritise China

Australia's strategy against foreign interference through social media needs to prioritise China because it is among the fastest-growing sources of threats and challenges. Currently, China's state-led activities on English-language social media are limited in both scale and scope. Compared to Russia's social media manipulation, China's efforts do not demonstrate the same kind of malign intentions and sophistication. But this is changing fast.

China poses a serious threat to open societies through information manipulation. Its persistent and well-resourced campaign against Taiwan on social media highlights this. The campaign aims to influence public opinion and undermine the legitimacy of its government and democratic institutions.

China's ruling Chinese Communist Party (CCP) uses propaganda, censorship, and misinformation on social media to shape the information environment, both in China and beyond. These activities aim to bolster the CCP's legitimacy, silence or delegitimise dissent, and influence elite and public opinion on select issues, such as on Taiwan and Hong Kong.

China's social media operations, especially misinformation operations, are on the rise. China is targeting Chinese diaspora, including Chinese-Australians, in order to shape perceptions across a growing spectrum of issues. These activities are often conducted through Chinese social media platforms, such as WeChat, Weibo, Douyin (Chinese version of TikTok).

But these operations are also increasingly being conducted on non-Chinese social media platforms. Recent reports of Chinese state-led misinformation campaign on Facebook and Twitter to undermine the legitimacy of Hong Kong's protest movement illustrates this.

Chinese-Australian Communities

The Australian Government needs to increase outreach to Chinese-Australian communities as a key part of its strategy addressing China's foreign interference efforts through social media. These communities are both the most affected group and a critical part of an effective Australian response.

Chinese-Australian communities should not be seen as predominately a vector of China's foreign interference operations. Rather, they are the targets,

and in some cases, victims of China's misinformation, censorship and cyber-surveillance efforts. Australia needs to protect their rights as any other Australians, and treat them as a national asset and not a liability.

Increasing government outreach to these communities would serve three key purposes. First, it enables the better communication of government policy, strategy and priorities with the opportunity to hear community feedback. Instead of focusing on a narrow range of groups and voices, outreach efforts should take into account the diversity of Chinese-Australian communities, which cuts across political, socioeconomic, cultural and religious lines.

Second, regular and effective outreach by the Australian Government can assist with early identification of community concerns, and new challenges and threats. Chinese-Australians are the main targets of China's propaganda, misinformation, cyber surveillance, and censorship efforts through social media. Regular outreach provides an avenue to counter Chinese-language misinformation, especially in relation to government policy.

Third, the support of Chinese-Australians is crucial for an effective strategy addressing China's foreign interference efforts. Community anxiety about racism, belonging, and undue suspicion has been heightened by Australia's heated China debate. As the public debate around the *National Security Legislation Amendment (Espionage and Foreign Interference) Act 2018* illustrates, better government outreach to the Chinese-Australian communities is needed to allay anxieties and build trust. Building community trust is not only about gaining support for government policy, but it is also a long term process that requires sustained investment.

Digital Media Literacy

The ability to access and critically interact with media, including traditional, internet and social media, is more important than ever for citizens to make informed decisions. Over the long term, raising media literacy is the most reliable and cost-effective counter to the effects of propaganda and disinformation campaigns.

The Australian Government should work with state and territory governments to prioritise digital media literacy and education in Australian schools. This would include providing more resources and training support for teach-

ers, and reducing the inconsistencies across educational sectors teaching media literacy under the Australian Curriculum.

In addition, Chinese and English language media literacy and education material could also be directed at Chinese-Australian communities as part of the Australian Government's outreach efforts. This would build community resilience to propaganda and misinformation by foreign powers.

Freedom of Speech

The strongest defence against information manipulation by foreign state actors is a resilient civil society, media and public sector. Freedom of speech is a fundamental tenet of democracy, and critical to democratic resilience. As such, Australia political leaders and officials should consistently articulate and demonstrate the importance of freedom of speech, including in official dealings with China as well as in domestic dealings with journalists and protesters.

Australia must protect the freedom of speech of all of its citizens, including both those that criticise and support the Chinese Government on selected issues. Particular attention, however, should be paid to groups that are vulnerable to coercion by the Chinese state, such as Chinese diaspora, dissidents, Uyghurs, Tibetans and others.

In many cases, the Australian Government will not be able to stop coercion by China against individuals residing in Australia with the aim to silence them. For example, Chinese authorities could pressure Australian residents through their family connections in China. Australia, however, can and should protect these vulnerable individuals when coercion is conducted on Australia soil by an agent of the Chinese state.

Moreover, it should protect Australians against cyber-harassment and abuse. The Australian Government has proposed a new Online Safety Act, which will introduce a take-down and reporting scheme to tackle cyber abuse directed at Australian adults. In trying to improve Australia's online safety regulatory framework, due consideration should be given to the experience of vulnerable groups that have been subject to coercion by the Chinese state or online harassment and abuse.

Analytical Capabilities on China

It is critical that Australia builds up analytical capabilities on China's foreign influence, interference, propaganda, and misinformation operations. Challenges and threats from China's foreign interference activities, including through social media, will only multiply in the years ahead. Collaborative efforts by the Australian Government, education institutions, and think tanks will be necessary. Australia should also learn from the experience of others, such as Taiwan and Hong Kong.