
NEWS

China's Global Lockdown Propaganda Campaign

Inside the CCP's use of social media bots and other disinformation tactics to promote its own response to the coronavirus pandemic and attack its critics

BY MICHAEL P. SENGER

SEPTEMBER 15, 2020

IN THE WORDS OF SIMON LEYS, PARAPHRASING THE GREAT SINOLOGIST László Ladány, even the most mendacious propaganda must necessarily entertain some relation to truth. In Wuhan in late December, Dr. Li Wenliang warned his friends that a new SARS-like illness had begun spreading rapidly. Li's message inadvertently went viral on Chinese social media, causing widespread panic and anger at the Chinese Communist Party. On Jan. 7, Xi Jinping informed his inner circle that the situation in Wuhan would require their personal supervision.

Two weeks later, Xi personally authorized the lockdown of Hubei province based on his philosophy of *fangkong*, the same hybrid of health and security policy that inspired the reeducation and "quarantine" of over 1 million Uighur Muslims "infected with extremism" in Xinjiang. The World Health Organization's representative in China noted that "trying to contain a city of 11 million people is new to science ... The lockdown of 11 million people is unprecedented in public health history, so it is certainly not a recommendation the WHO has made."

The CCP confined 57 million Hubei residents to their homes. At the time, human rights observers expressed concerns. As one expert told *The New York Times*, "the shutdown would almost certainly lead to human rights violations

and would be patently unconstitutional in the United States.”

Regardless, on Jan. 29, WHO Director Tedros Adhanom said he was “very impressed and encouraged by the president [Xi Jinping]’s detailed knowledge of the outbreak” and the next day praised China for “setting a new standard for outbreak response.” Yet only six days in, the lockdown—“unprecedented in public health history”—had produced no results, so Tedros was praising human rights abuses with nothing to show for them.

International COVID-19 hysteria began around Jan. 23, when “leaked” videos from Wuhan began flooding international social media sites including Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube—all of which are blocked in China—allegedly showing the horrors of Wuhan’s epidemic and the seriousness of its lockdown. Viral videos claimed to show residents spontaneously collapsing in the streets in scenes likened to the movie *Zombieland* and the show *The Walking Dead*. One video purportedly showed a SWAT team catching a man with a butterfly net for removing his mask. But in hindsight, this crisis theater is somewhat comical; in the infamous video, the “spontaneously collapsing” man extends his arms to catch himself.

Official Chinese accounts widely shared an image of a hospital wing supposedly constructed in one day, but which actually showed an apartment 600 miles away. Images of Li Wenliang on a ventilator, sometimes holding his identification card, were released and widely displayed by top news outlets around the world.

In a viral tweet on Jan. 25, an epidemiologist with little background in infectious disease wrote, “HOLY MOTHER OF GOD, the new coronavirus is a 3.8!!! How bad is that reproductive R0 value? It is thermonuclear pandemic level bad.” This was the first of a monthslong series of dubious, widely shared tweets by the previously unknown Eric Feigl-Ding, prompting a prominent Harvard colleague to denounce him as a “charlatan.”

And then—success! Beginning in February, the CCP reported an exponential decline in coronavirus cases, until March 19 when they announced their lockdown had eliminated domestic cases entirely.

In its Feb. 24 report, the WHO waxed rhapsodic about China's triumph. "China's *uncompromising* and *rigorous* use of non-pharmaceutical measures to contain transmission of the COVID-19 virus in multiple settings provides *vital* lessons for the global response" (emphasis added). Scientists quickly began drafting plans in many languages to imitate China's lockdowns. *The New York Times* immediately cited WHO's report, forming a pro-lockdown stance it has clung to for months with surprisingly little introspection: "China 'took one of the most ancient strategies and rolled out one of the most ambitious, agile and aggressive disease-containment efforts in history.'"

On Feb. 26, WHO's Bruce Aylward of Canada—who later disconnected a live interview when asked to acknowledge Taiwan—put it bluntly: "Copy China's response to COVID-19." In April, Canada's parliament summoned Aylward for questioning, but the WHO has forbidden him from testifying.

- - - - -

Within China, the CCP has long paid hundreds of thousands of social media propagandists and also pays for posts on an a la carte basis, totaling hundreds of millions of propaganda comments each year. More recently, these activities have gone global and escalated dramatically during the coronavirus pandemic. Social media companies have proven somewhat unserious about the gravity of the problem. When the State Department provided a sample of 250,000 accounts likely involved in coronavirus disinformation, Twitter refused to take action. These activities affect countries with little say in social media governance; a recent study found thousands of inauthentic accounts still promoting Serbian-Chinese friendship after Twitter deleted thousands of others. A former Facebook employee wrote "I have blood on my hands" due to the company's routinely discounting malicious political activity despite its "disproportionate impact."

On March 9, Italy, the first major European country to sign onto Xi Jinping's Belt and Road Initiative, took the WHO's advice and became the first country outside China to lock down. Italian Prime Minister Giuseppe Conte had long advocated closer ties with China. Chinese experts arrived in Italy on March 12

and two days later advised a tighter lockdown: “There are still too many people and behaviors on the street to improve.” On March 19, they repeated that Italy’s lockdown was “not strict enough,” saying: “Here in Milan, the hardest hit area by COVID-19, there isn’t a very strict lockdown ... We need every citizen to be involved in the fight of COVID-19 and follow this policy.”

Italy was simultaneously bombarded with Chinese disinformation. From March 11 to 23, roughly 46% of tweets with the hashtag #forzaCinaeItalia (Go China, go Italy) and 37% of those with the hashtag #grazieCina (thank you China) came from bots.

While analysts typically focus on finding as many inauthentic accounts as possible, the purpose of the following discussion is different—using simple investigatory methods to evince the intent behind Beijing’s disinformation, which appears to be far more insidious than analysts have recognized. Social media and analytics companies generally only detect obvious automated activity, while fake, personally managed accounts can be created with ease. This works out well for the CCP, which has always preferred the human touch.

On March 12, Twitter user @manisha_kataki posted a video showing Chinese workers disinfecting streets, apparently admiring China’s strategy: “At this rate, China will be back in action very soon, may be much faster than the world expects.” As *The New York Times*’ Paul Mozur noted, this tweet was not shocking, funny, or newsworthy, yet it was shared hundreds of thousands of times. This caught the attention of Israeli company Next Dim, which flagged the activity as likely state-sponsored.

The collages shown here contain a tiny sample of the thousands of suspicious quote-tweets of @manisha_kataki’s video using many languages and dialects to complain in nearly identical terms about being told to “wash their hands” and denigrating other governments in contrast to China’s full lockdowns. Other suspicious quote-tweets of @manisha_kataki’s video explicitly implore leaders to copy China and lock down cities and countries. Many of these same accounts also frequently discuss racial divisions. Later in 2020, they show strong support for Black Lives Matter (BLM) protests, especially those surrounding the death of George Floyd. Racial justice is an issue of real concern to many citizens, both

in America and throughout the world. But knowing that the CCP supported these protests, it's worth pondering the likelihood that the frugal Xi would not be spending billions of dollars per year on foreign propaganda—and stepping up those activities—if he weren't seeing results.

Some of these accounts are surely legitimate, but taken together they demonstrate conspicuous similarity that strongly suggests scripted, state-sponsored activity. Twitter responded to Mozur's article by deleting 170,000 accounts, but at the time of this writing many of the suspect accounts are still active, and a search for hundreds of similar examples can be easily repeated with one click.

As more countries shut down, some suspicious online activity took a darker turn. When South Dakota Gov. Kristi Noem famously refused to issue a statewide lockdown, suspicious accounts began filling her Twitter feed with abuse and graphic language to pressure her to do so. Upon closer examination, two of the accounts hurl similar abuse at governors thousands of miles apart.

This abuse of anti-lockdown governors continued for some time. When Georgia Gov. Brian Kemp, the first governor to end his state's lockdown, honored late Rep. John Lewis, his Twitter feed was stormed with conspicuous, vulgar language that often invoked his anti-lockdown stance.

Some CCP propagandists are identifiable by their advocacy for China's policies and human rights abuses. The following user, @AmerLiberal, appears to be a model CCP propaganda account, showing strong support for China's human rights abuses—including in Xinjiang and Hong Kong—and antipathy for China's key rivals, India and the United States. The account strongly supports global lockdowns.

Though much of the CCP's pro-lockdown influence was surreptitious, its overall stance in support of global lockdowns was explicit. In a video posted by China's official spokesperson, a 7-year-old girl recites the importance of strict social distancing among children.

In March, Chinese state media began describing the strategy of “herd immunity”

—allowing the coronavirus to spread among the young and healthy—as a violation of “human rights,” an Orwellian formulation given that lockdowns are essentially a blanket suspension of rights.

Sweden’s skepticism toward the CCP predates COVID-19. In January, Beijing threatened Swedish trade ties over an award given to Gui Minhai, a Swedish publisher detained in China. Sweden did not back down and later refused to follow China’s lockdown model, opting for a herd immunity strategy. Thus, Sweden became a prime target of a Chinese campaign portraying it as weak against the COVID threat. In the words of China’s state-run *Global Times*:

Chinese analysts and netizens doubt herd immunity and called it a violation of human rights, citing high mortality in the country compared to other Northern European countries. “So-called human rights, democracy, freedom are heading in the wrong direction in Sweden, and countries that are extremely irresponsible do not deserve to be China’s friend ...”

Initially, British Prime Minister Boris Johnson also opted for herd immunity. But on March 13, suspicious accounts began storming his Twitter feed and likening his plan to genocide. This language almost never appears in Johnson’s feed before March 12, and several of the accounts were hardly active before then. Britain locked down on March 23.

Xi Jinping has frequently stressed global cooperation to fight COVID-19. In turn, the world has started to look more like China. Localities introduced tip lines to report lockdown violations and countries unveiled new fleets of surveillance drones; Chinese company DJI donated drones to 22 U.S. states to help enforce social distancing rules.

Speaking through official channels, the CCP has avoided literally telling other governments to “lock down.” Rather, the CCP has shamed governments for not locking down and relentlessly advertised its “pandemic response” (which, of course, means lockdowns).

In March, Chinese state media bought numerous Facebook ads extolling China’s pandemic response; all of them ran without Facebook’s required political

disclaimer. On July 7, FBI Director Christopher Wray disclosed that the CCP specifically approached local politicians to endorse its pandemic response:

[W]e have heard from federal, state, and even local officials that Chinese diplomats are aggressively urging support for China’s handling of the COVID-19 crisis. Yes, this is happening at both the federal and state levels. Not that long ago, we had a state senator who was recently even asked to introduce a resolution supporting China’s response to the pandemic.

For decades, the CCP has co-opted scientists through its unparalleled overseas influence network, the United Front Work Department, which expanded dramatically under Xi. In June, the National Institutes of Health (NIH) announced that 189 of its grantees had received undisclosed funding from foreign governments. In 93% of cases, including that of Charles Lieber, chair of Harvard’s chemistry department, the undisclosed funding came from China. Likewise, the National Science Foundation, a smaller organization, reported 16–20 cases of undisclosed foreign financial ties; all but two were with China.

In a May interview for China Central Television, Richard Horton, editor-in-chief of the esteemed medical journal *The Lancet*, emphatically praised China’s lockdowns, saying: “It was not only the right thing to do, but it also showed other countries how they should respond in the face of such an acute threat. So, I think we have a great deal to thank China for ...”

Horton’s praise is telling in light of the infamous retraction of a Lancet study on hydroxochloroquine and reports that promising journal articles on herd immunity have gone unpublished. In August, Horton doubled down in a full-throated piece that had surprisingly little to do with health:

The “century of humiliation,” when China was dominated by a colonially-minded west and Japan, only came to an end with the Communist victory in the civil war in 1949 ... Every contemporary Chinese leader, including Xi Jinping, has seen their task as protecting the territorial security won by Mao and the economic security achieved by Deng.

The CCP has shaped scientific narratives by consistently promoting the

falsehood that “China controlled the virus.” Of course, “China controlled the virus” is a baldfaced lie. China expelled journalists in March and its infection data is manifestly forged; U.S. intelligence has confirmed China’s data is intentionally misrepresented.

Nonetheless, China’s fake numbers have been paramount in scientific discourse. By demanding elite publications repeat the Orwellian lie that “China controlled the virus,” the CCP has normalized that lie for Western elites to repeat themselves, exploiting China’s fastidiously managed reputation and the fact that most Westerners do not yet know it as an untrustworthy, totalitarian state.

The fact that Chinese state media so widely shared a particularly credulous *New Yorker* article by Peter Hessler about China’s coronavirus response did not escape China expert Geremie Barmé, who cautioned its author that it reminded him of “another American journalist, a man who reported from another authoritarian country nearly a century ago ... Walter Duranty ...”

Within China, the CCP has pretended to believe its own lies only at its own convenience, reserving the right to use COVID-19 as a pretext for unrelated authoritarian whims—demolishing retirement homes, detaining dissidents and reporters, expanding mass surveillance, canceling Hong Kong’s Tiananmen Square vigil and postponing its elections for one year. In Xinjiang, where over 1 million Uighurs are imprisoned, lockdowns have gone on since January and have involved widespread hunger, forced medication, acidic disinfectant sprays, shackled residents, screams of protest from balconies, crowded “quarantine” cells, and outright disappearances.

The most benign possible explanation for the CCP’s campaign for global lockdowns is that the party aggressively promoted the same lie internationally as domestically—that lockdowns worked. For party members, when Wuhan locked down it likely went without saying that the lockdown would “eliminate” coronavirus; if Xi willed it to be true, then it must be so. This is the totalitarian pathology that George Orwell called “double-think.” But the fact that authoritarian regimes always lie does not give them a right to spread deadly lies to the rest of the world, especially by clandestine means.

And then there's the possibility that by shutting down the world, Xi Jinping, who vaulted through the ranks of the party, quotes ancient Chinese scholars, has mastered debts and derivatives, studies complexity science, and envisions a socialist future with China at its center, knew exactly what he was doing.

Michael P. Senger is an attorney based in San Francisco. His Twitter account is [@MichaelPSenger](#).

#CHINA #COVID-19 #PROPAGANDA #WUHAN #A TABLET COVID-19 READER