

'Think Tank Policy Task.'

Briefing Paper: Think Tank to Monitor Foreign Propaganda in Anglosphere Media

Summary

Since the turn of the millennium states that can be regarded as ideological challengers to the neoliberal democratic model of the West such as China and Russia have invested significant sums and given significant strategic attention to propagating a positive media image of themselves, both by establishing English language news organisations and by investing in existing Western media outlets. So successful has Russia's media push been that William Davies, Director of the Ukraine Communications Task Force at the U.S. State Department, commented that the U.S. has fallen far behind in terms of capabilities (Powell, 2014), and despite the social media platform being inaccessible in mainland China, Chinese state media CCTV has amassed 25 million likes on Facebook, second only to the BBC for news outlets (Ohlberg, 2016). The proposed think tank would seek to monitor the use of English language news organisations in the West and identify the realisation of ideological strategies enacted in other key geopolitical players, namely China and Russia, though there is scope to focus on other countries, including the media activity of western nations. The think tank would seek to draw on the expertise of international relations scholars as well as experts in the fields of public relations and journalism. While the proposed think tank is ideologically Western-centric and neoliberal in outlook, it would aim not to cast judgment on foreign media efforts, but to outline the ethical dilemmas and insidious challenges such media activity poses. This is further elaborated on below.

Foreign ideology in the Anglosphere media: ethical challenges

Foreign ownership of Anglosphere media is not in itself an ideological challenge, but what poses significant complications, and the ethical crux in this arena, is when Anglosphere media is owned by foreign news companies with strong ties to their domestic states. International relations often focuses on more overt geopolitical clashes over resources or arms build-up, but the Realist schools of thought that dominate the discipline put power at the centre of study (Rosenthal), and ideology is a key determinant of international relations, as a reading of Huntington's hugely influential 'Clash of Civilizations?' will show (Huntington, 1993). Yet crucial to the shaping of ideology is propaganda, which and former U.S. government propaganda clerk and academic Nancy Lee has called "the defining ingredient of international relations" (Snow, 2012). Snow defines propaganda as "source-based, cause-oriented, emotion-laden content that utilizes mass persuasion media to cultivate the mass mind in service to the source's goals" (Snow, 2012). In international relations propaganda has complex and ethical repercussions, because it is not in itself positive nor negative, but simply a tool that is the epitome of what Joseph Nye termed "soft power" (Ikenberry, 2004).

Foreign owned media and the study of it reaches into the heart of a key ethical challenge in the field of international relations in that the Realist school is at ease with the idea of a nation state communicating its ideas with the international public but public opinion itself is an ambiguous concept (Chatterjee, 2010, p. 88) and when there is direct state involvement behind a media platform, the issue is complicated further. It is widely accepted that propaganda is a key way of engaging the public in the democratic process, but generally international relations practitioners are more ill at ease when it comes to propaganda being used to shape public opinion towards a particular end (Gelders and Ihlen, 2010, p. 59). What makes the area even more ethically fraught is that the terms public relations, propaganda are themselves arbitrary and loaded terms, though both focus on the idea of persuasion (L'Etang, 2002, pp. 47-48). The proposed think tank would engage with the finer points of these terms

and their connotations in the context of state influence over Western media, and challenge their applicability in this context.

Foreign ideology in the Anglosphere media: the state of play

While it is vital that the ethical implications outlined above are addressed by the proposed think tank, these ethical issues of course must be aligned with a practical issue that is affecting real world geopolitics.

In itself there should be no issue with foreign ownership of English language media in another country as this is entirely in line with the dominant school of neoliberal economics and its principle that there should be no impediments to trade in companies. However, there are complications when a Chinese state-backed company attempts to purchase a company that has previously operated according to free market principles or when a Chinese state-backed company is competing with other private companies that do not have the support of an entire state, and the economic distortions that inevitably occur in such a situation. The ethical implications of this situation came to the fore in April when the European Commission reviewed a proposed joint venture project between Chinese state-owned enterprise General Nuclear Power (CGN) and EDF in France, and ruled that because CGN had the full support of the Chinese government through its State-owned Assets Supervision and Administration Commission, which controls the vast majority of state-owned enterprises, there was a sufficient grounds for viewing CGN as part of the same entity as all the nuclear companies controlled by SASAC and therefore its turnover must be viewed differently (Price, 2016).

The point of the CGN example is that Chinese state media should also not be viewed as independent of the Chinese state, and this has huge implications for Chinese state media purchasing Western media outlets. Chinese news media are subject to stringent state

regulations. Chinese journalism textbooks teach students that the media must propagate the Party's programs and embrace its ideology and methods as their own (Zhao, 1998, p.19). All journalists in China must have a press card from the General Administration of Press Publication if they are to be employed legally. To receive this card, they must first pass a test that includes many questions on Marxist-Leninist media theory (Hassid, 2011, p.816). For newspapers, licenses control the nature of what is published. For example, the market-oriented *Lifeweek* is not licensed to cover current affairs (Qian & Bandurski, 2008, p.43). In television, the State Administration of Radio, Film and Television told TV companies to cap the number of foreign films they import 'so that the market of domestic counterparts is prosperous' (Miao Di, 2008, p.98).

Given the Chinese government's control over its media apparatus it should cause some alarm that the government has embarked on a programme of extending its persuasive reach through acquiring foreign media outlets. A clear example of this was e-commerce giant Alibaba's recent acquisition of the *South China Morning Post*, a Hong Kong publication and a beacon for quality journalism in the region (Ohlberg, 2016). Similarly, *China Daily* has signed a deal with Australia's *Fairfax Media* to run a lift-out series to go in the *Sydney Morning Herald* (Clark, 2016). Combined with its own English language versions of *China Daily*, such as *China Daily USA* and its online editorial publication *Global Times*, there are clear signs that the Chinese government is seeking to improve its image abroad, and it would be the duty of the proposed think tank to explore the ramifications of this.

There is also clearly the scope for the proposed think tank to examine the Russian government's efforts to develop its English language publications. The most notable example of this in recent times was the rebranding of online news service *Russia Today*, later *RT*. In 2015, the Russian state increased its investment in the news channel by more than 50%, to

around £202 million (Ennis, 2015). Over the last few years RT has advertised heavily in the UK in particular, trying to present itself as an anti-establishment alternative to the mainstream press. According to William J Dobson, the aim of Russia's media campaigning is not simply to mislead or provide a Russian interpretation of news events; rather, it is an effort to create conflicting accounts of events and to shroud the truth of events in enough confusion that no new outlet's version of the event is entirely trusted (Dobson, 2012).

The role of the proposed think tank would be to investigate English language media that is owned by foreign states and the extent to which their news coverage can be regarded as propaganda. Another purpose would simply be to investigate the funding and backing of news outlets so that this information is more clearly available both to the academic community and to government. In performing this role the think tank would be exploring our own understanding of what it means to deal in a legitimate voicing of one's argument and deception. Given the media restrictions on English news publications within China itself, notable the Wall Street Journal and the New York Times, it appears valid and timely to have a Western focused think tank exploring the ramifications of having state interference in an area which many in the West assume to be generally free of government bias.

Pamphlet: Think Tank to Monitor Foreign Propaganda in Anglosphere Media

'Media Watch' Think Tank

Understanding the ideological battles of the 21st century

When William Stevens, the Director of the Ukraine Communications Task Force at the U.S. State Department, warned in 2014 that Russia had developed capabilities in its foreign language propaganda capabilities that far outstripped the West, his words registered a new reality of

geopolitical influence that the international relations community has previously pursued but with insufficient coordination to be truly effective. The 'Media Watch' think tank will remedy this by bringing together international relations practitioners, experts from the world of communications and the journalistic community to focus on what is emerging as one of the most important battlefronts of the information age.

Monitoring the media influence of foreign states in the English language is a difficult task that will also delve into some of the most central ethical issues of the international relations field. As Rosenthal has noted, for Socrates ethics was the study of the way that we chose to live as individuals, but this has equal implications for the way that states choose to interact on the global stage, particularly if certain codes of conduct are violated (Rosenthal). According to eminent scholar Robert Jackson, the international order intends to establish certain codes of conduct that states must abide by (Jackson, 2003). No clear codes of conduct extend over media messaging and propaganda, however, and part of the role of the Media Watch think tank will be to develop the relevant frameworks for analysing state interference in media and ultimately to recommend codes of conduct in this area.

Making Sense of a complex ideological network

Studies of Chinese government documents and Russia's approach to media communications have demonstrated that a clear strategy is in place to influence a broader ideological war through news media (Ohlberg, 2016), (Dobson, 2012). The Media Watch think tank aims not to take a position of judgment on the validity of such actions so much it aims to make sense of the ramifications of such actions. In this regard it will also examine the contradictions that arise from the support of free market economics that dictate that market forces are able to determine the worth of a company and that purchasers should be free of state interference. However, in the international context this ideology appears insufficient. While the state-

backed China Daily has been able to make deals with Western media such as the Sydney Morning Herald and e-commerce giant Alibaba have been free to purchase Hong Kong standard-bearer for impartial journalism, the South China Morning Post, as Chinese media scholar Ying Zhu has noted, Western media is mostly blocked in China (Zhu, 2015, p. 109). This draws attention to the contradiction between permitting a free media market for domestic news outlets when the same freedoms are not permitted in the purchasing country. These are core questions about the nature of free trade in the media industry that have so far been insufficiently explored, a problem that the establishment of the Media Watch think tank aims to address.

It is important that the “Media Watch” think tank does not itself become an outlet for pro-Western propaganda and an arena for denouncing foreign governments. The aim is not to make moral judgements on other nations, which would also be contrary to the tenets of Realist approaches to international relations and ignore the ethical subtleties of the subject. What is needed much more urgently is an assessment of how foreign media is working. For example, among its more overt news media organisations such as Xinhua and China Daily, the Chinese government has also set up a new online news portal called Sixth Tone, which makes no sign of being a government owned news outlet and which publishes stories that are far less overtly in support of the government’s agenda (Ohlberg, 2016). What is necessary is a thorough assessment of the likely aims and implications of such an organisation, and how it fits into the wider propaganda scheme. The “Media Watch” think tank would provide the cross-discipline expertise to be able to analyse such questions from more angles than is previously occurring.

Good and Bad Propaganda?

Within this area of study questions will inevitably emerge regarding whether we can deem any time of propaganda more pernicious than another. It will be objected that the UK has long run BBC news services in many world languages and that especially during recent wars, such as during the early years of the occupation of Iraq, UK government ministries would pressure what are supposedly free news outlets into reporting misinformation regarding developments on the battlefield, knowing that opposition troops would also receive the misinformation and would base their movements on imaginary threats (Davies, 2009). This example shows that Western governments have often been just as willing to subvert the freedoms of its own media, and as secondary focus, the think tank would be well poised to explore the ethics of these issues and assess their significance in comparison to foreign ownership of media and some of the other activities outlined in this pamphlet.

Understanding the new battlefield of geopolitics

In the Cold War propaganda from the West and the Soviet Union targeted populations within clear spheres of influence between the major powers. However, with the advent of the internet and an explosion of a diverse range of news sources, the opportunities for state propaganda have become greater than ever, and the Russian and Chinese states have been quick to exploit the new reality (Dobson, 2012). The proposed Media Watch think tank is an effort to map out the new state affairs, which has created a new battleground for state propaganda that is far more difficult to navigate than before. In this task the think tank will be engaging with some of the most challenging ethical questions of international relations that will bring to the fore assumptions about the justness of types of propaganda on the basis of the source. It is an area of study that is needed urgently, and the establishment of this think tank fills a void that currently exists in the range of institutions studying the issue.

Bibliography

Chaterjee, A. 2010. *International Relations Today: Concepts and Applications*.

Clark, Helen. 2016. "China's Foothold in Struggling Australian Media", *The Diplomat*, (online, accessed 28/07/2016), [<http://thediplomat.com/2016/06/chinas-foothold-in-struggling-australian-media/>].

Davies, N. 2009 *Flat Earth News*, Vintage

Dobson, W. 2012, *The Dictator's Learning Curve*, Harvill Secker.

Ennis, S. 2015. "Russia in 'information war' with West to win hearts and minds", *BBC*, (online, accessed 28/07/2016), [<http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-europe-34248178>].

Gang, Qian and Bandurski, David (2008) *China's Emerging Public Sphere: The Impact of Media Commercialisation, Professionalism, and the Internet in an Era of Transition*.

Gelders, D. and Ihlen, O. 2010. Government communication about potential policies: Public relations, propaganda or both? *Public Relations Review*, 36 (1), 59-62.

Hassid, Jonathan (2011) Four Models of the Fourth Estate: A Typology of Contemporary Chinese Journalists. *The China Quarterly* 208: 813-832.

Huntington, S.P., 1993. The clash of civilizations?. *Foreign affairs*, 1993. pp.22-49.

L'Etang, J. 2009. Public Relations and Diplomacy in a Globalized World: An Issue of Public Communication. *The American Behavioral Scientist*, 53(4),607-626.

Ikenberry, G J. 2004. "Review: Soft Power: The Means to Success in World Politics", by Joseph Nye. *Foreign Affairs*, May/June issue.

Jackson, R. 2003. *The Global Covenant: Human Conduct in a World of States*, OUP.

Jeffrey, R. and Sen, R. (eds.), 2015, *Media at Work in China and India: Discovering and Dissecting*, SAGE.

Miao, Di (2008) "Between Propaganda and Commercials: Chinese Television Today", Shirik, Susan (ed.) *Changing China, Changing Media*. Oxford University Press.

Morgenthau, Hans J. 1986. *Politics Among Nations*, New York: Alfred Knopf, 6th edition.

Ohlberg, M. 2016. "Boosting the Party's Voice: China's quest for global ideological dominance", Merics Institute, (online, accessed 28/07/2016), [<http://www.merics.org/en/merics-analysis/analyseschina-monitor/merics-china-monitor-no-34.html#>].

Powell, A. 2014, "Is the US losing the propaganda war with Russia?", USC Annenberg Center on Communication Leadership & Policy (online, accessed 28/07/2016), [<https://communicationleadership.usc.edu/news/is-the-us-losing-the-propaganda-war-with-russia/>].

Price, M. 2016. "Chinese state-owned companies face greater scrutiny of EU deals after ruling" *Reuters*, (online, accessed 28/07/2016), [<http://www.carnegiecouncil.org/education/001/ethics/eiaprimer.html>].

Rosenthal, J. 2012. "Ethics and International Affairs: A Primer". *Carnegie Council for Ethics and International Affairs*, (online, accessed 28/07/2016), [<http://uk.reuters.com/article/us-china-eu-m-a-idUKKCN0YZ00U>].

Snow, N. 2012, "Public Diplomacy and Propaganda: Rethinking Diplomacy in the Age of Persuasion". *E-International Relations*, (online, accessed 28/07/2016) [<http://www.e-ir.info/2012/12/04/public-diplomacy-and-propaganda-rethinking-diplomacy-in-the-age-of-persuasion/>]

Zhang, Xiaoling. *The Transformation of Political Communication in China*. World Scientific Press, 2011.

Zhu, M. 2015. "China's Cultural War Against the West", in Jeffrey, R. and Sen, R. (eds.), 2015, *Media at Work in China and India: Discovering and Dissecting*, SAGE.

