

# CCTV

## A TROJAN HORSE IN INTERNATIONAL NEWS DISSEMINATION?

BY ØYSTEIN BOGEN

### Summary

- Thanks to contracts with the world's leading TV news agencies, Chinese State Broadcaster CCTV has managed to buy unfiltered access to global news production.
- This access is being used to spread disinformation and propaganda on a large scale. Many of the CCTV items analysed are heavily editorialised, contain dubious sourcing and appear to be designed to reinforce China's foreign policy priorities.
- During the past six months, CCTV's material has focused heavily on Covid-19, sometimes spreading stories that amount to conspiracy theories.
- The volume of CCTV material being distributed by AP and Reuters appears to be increasing, while the awareness of the phenomenon in newsrooms seems to be low. There is an increasing danger that disinformation from the Chinese Communist Party might end up on the TV screens of Western audiences.



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### Introduction

Authoritarian states' increasing use of disinformation to advance their political goals has been well-documented during the past five years. Much of this effort, as in the case of Russia, has been conducted via social media but sometimes also in parallel with efforts through state-controlled media outlets. While Russia's disinformation campaigns took off in the run-up to the US presidential election in 2016, researchers have found that Chinese efforts were low-key and mainly directed at domestic audiences until 2019. According to a University of Nebraska report, the pro-democracy protests in Hong Kong could have been the trigger that inspired Chinese authorities to go global via platforms such as Facebook, YouTube and Twitter.<sup>1</sup> It is reasonable to assume that this was accompanied by influence campaigns and that disinformation spread through other channels such as international news agencies, which are the focus of this report.

Associated Press and Reuters, the world's two largest news agencies, serve several hundred clients around the world with packaged video items for broadcast on national TV and web-based news portals. Thanks to contracts with these agencies, Chinese state propaganda and disinformation have acquired a new avenue to reach large audiences. As opposed to other authoritarian regimes, China has managed to hack into what could be described as the blood stream of international news production.

This report will examine some of the China Central Television's (CCTV) coverage circulated by Associated Press and Reuters. I have sampled a total of 70 CCTV items on the international feeds, appearing between June 3 and October 16, 2021. My emphasis in this report is on content, but I will also try to give an indication of the scope of the phenomenon. Finally, I will discuss the possible conse-

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1 Samantha Bradshaw and Philip Howard: "The Global Disinformation Order. 2019 Global Inventory of Organised Social Media Manipulation." (2019). The University of Nebraska.

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quences of CCTV's increasing presence in the international newsfeeds and suggest avenues for further research.

Due to the non-systematic selection of news items for analysis, the short period of time that the newsfeeds were observed and other weaknesses in methodology, this report does not pretend to be exhaustive. The report's purpose is also not to present scientifically valid conclusions, but rather to expose a glimpse of a phenomenon that appears to be little-known to most journalists and scholars and that warrants further study in the context of an increasingly assertive China on the international stage.

China's main state broadcaster China Central Television (CCTV) is owned by the National Radio and Television Administration, which in turn is overseen by the Chinese Communist Party (CPC) propaganda department. It currently operates more than 50 domestic and international television channels, of which China Global Television News (CGTN) has been the international arm since 2016, responsible for broadcasting globally in English, Spanish, French, Arabic, Japanese, Portuguese and Russian. Since 2018, a new state body called the China Media Group has governed the activities of both CCTV and CGTN. For simplicity, its content will be referred to as CCTV material in this report.

A government decree in 2011 started a global expansion of CCTV, ordering the company to enter into cooperative agreements with overseas broadcasters and to develop international marketing and distribution. Later that year, contracts were agreed with Thomson Reuters and Associated Press (AP), guaranteeing the distribution of scripted CCTV footage to several hundred global clients and thus expanding the Chinese state media giant's global reach dramatically. According to Reuters, this was primarily

done to satisfy “clients increasing appetite for news from China.” As noted by John Jirik, these deals were “part of a growing trend at both agencies to distribute unedited, unfiltered third-party material to subscribers.”<sup>2</sup>

According to a 2013 report from the Center for International Media Assistance, the overall goal of the CPC’s “2009-2020 Master Plan for the Construction of China’s Major Media as an International Dissemination Force” is to “enhance China’s image and convey its perspective to the world”.<sup>3</sup> Thus, CCTV’s international content is undisputedly under the control and censorship of the CPC propaganda department and must be considered a part of the CPC’s overall strategic communication efforts. Meanwhile, to the untrained eye, CCTV might appear to disseminate objective news produced by the same standards as other global news broadcasters. Regulators around the world are beginning to take action accordingly. For instance, the company’s vast operation in the US was slammed with restrictions under the Foreign Agents Registration Act (FARA) in 2018. In the UK, state regulator Ofcom withdrew the broadcasting licence of Star China Media, a subsidiary of CGTN. Most recently during the Covid-19 pandemic, CGTN has repeatedly been criticized by media watchdogs, including Reporters Without Borders, for disseminating disinformation about the pandemic and its origins.<sup>4</sup>

Within this context, the massive distribution of CCTV content by the leading Western news agencies Associated Press and Reuters is a paradox, given the agencies’ stated pledge to be providers of impartial and objective news to the world.

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2 John Jirik, ‘The CCTV Reuters relationship’ published in R. Jeffrey and R. Sen “Media at Work in China and India” (2015). Sage Publications India, p. 201.

3 Anne Nelson, ‘CCTV’s International Expansion: China’s Grand Strategy for Media?’, October 2013.

4 RSF, ‘Beware of China’s coronavirus disinformation, RSF says’, 18 April 2020.

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### The Scope

The newsfeeds of Associated Press and Reuters are distributed digitally and end up in the dedicated servers of their clients. The accompanying scripts to each packaged item are showcased on the web portals Reutersconnect.com and APvideohub.ap.org. To get an idea of the number of CCTV items being distributed through these services I randomly chose to take a closer look at the amount of output on three days, 3–5 June 2021.

On 5 June 2021, a rather slow international news day, Reuters carried a total of 60 news items on its international feed. 23 of these were scripted and produced by CCTV, amounting to 38 percent of the total output. By comparison, Associated Press carried 15 CCTV items on the same day from a total of 79, making CCTV’s share 19 percent. In both agencies, the share of CCTV items does vary from day to day. On 4 June 2021, Reuters distributed 18 Chinese items, and on 3 June there were 22. By contrast, on 16 October 2021, it was Associated Press who carried the most CCTV items – 17 – while Reuters distributed 11. It has not been possible to ascertain whether the variations reflect the offering of items from CCTV itself or if the daily or weekly numbers are contained in the contract with the news agencies.

A highly relevant question, which lies outside the scope of this report, is whether the amount of Chinese state material in newsfeeds has increased since the aforementioned start of the CPC’s efforts to ramp up influence operations through social media in 2019. A 2011 analysis of Reuters output indicate that the amount of CCTV material in that

agency's feed has certainly increased since the start of the cooperation in 2011. In this study, John Jirik found that the Chinese material on average accounted for only 6 per cent of Reuters' output.<sup>5</sup>

On 5 June, 18 of the 23 Chinese items related to events happening in China. They may therefore be seen as having some journalistic value, since they provided material that clients otherwise might not have had access to. The rest of the items on this day were produced by CCTV field offices, specifically from bureaus in the UK, US, Israel, Afghanistan and Russia.

Both Reuters and Associated Press disseminate CCTV material for money through their contracts with the Chinese state broadcasting organisation. Even though the Chinese material comprises a relatively large share of the total, both agencies seem to share the philosophy that the CCTV material is additional content beyond their normal output and is not in any way displacing their own journalistic products. Nevertheless, the distribution effort in itself raises serious concerns. The very fact that the CPC pays for their content to be disseminated through these internationally respected agencies means that the scripted items cannot be considered news, but rather as PR material.

It should be mentioned that the agencies do occasionally also disseminate so-called VNRs (Video News Releases). VNRs is scripted video content that looks like news, but is in fact produced by PR agencies and distributed on the newsfeeds for money, in most cases to promote commercial products.

The total number of such items on the newsfeeds of Reuters and Associated Press is considerably lower than what CCTV disseminates. For example, on 5 June 2021, neither of the agencies carried any such items.

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<sup>5</sup> John Jirik, 'The CCTV Reuters relationship' published in R. Jeffrey and R. Sen "Media at Work in China and India" (2015). Sage Publications India.

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Compared to the CCTV material, these commercial messages are easier to spot for reporters and editors, as the scripts are tagged as such and the material's origin (for instance Pizza Hut or Taco Bell) is clearly stated. In the Chinese items, the origin of the material is simply stated as China Media Group or CCTV. It could be argued that a more honest way to inform clients would be to tag the items as VNRs originating with the Chinese Communist Party, whose ultimate goal is after all political rather than commercial impact.

A central question in this report is whether or not the Chinese items disseminated through Associated Press and Reuters are clearly marked so that news organisations are aware of their source. Associated Press and Reuters have put warnings and disclaimers on the CCTV items, both on-screen in front of the footage and on accompanying scripts. In the case of Reuters, these are not particularly visible on the latter:

*This asset - including all text, audio and imagery - is provided by CCTV. Reuters does not guarantee the accuracy of, or endorse any views or opinions expressed in, this asset.*

The Associated Press disclaimers – particularly on-screen – are, in this author's view, marginally more visible:

*AP is distributing the following video news release on behalf of CCTV. Material is not AP content. AP does not guarantee the accuracy of this content nor endorse any opinion reflected in it.*

Apart from the disclaimers, the Chinese items appear identical to any other video footage made available by both agencies. This applies to the format of accompany-

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ing scripts and the video items themselves, which typically have a duration of two to five minutes with natural sound and soundbites arranged in a linear way. The production quality of the CCTV items is generally as high as or higher than the other agency material, often involving stunning drone shots, great GVs (general view) and other technical features that will make them attractive to editors around the world. In this context, allow me to remark that anyone who has ever worked in a newsroom knows that there is always a degree of deadline pressure. The experience, competence and thoroughness of individual journalists and video editors will vary, and editors/producers will not always be able to double-check sourcing before deadlines, especially in a breaking news context.

With the sheer volume of Chinese material becoming available on news servers around the world, there is increasing danger that CCTV items intended for political influence may slip through editorial control and oversight and end up being aired.

### A Look at the Content

A sample of 70 CCTV items distributed by Associated Press and Reuters between 3 June and 16 October 2021 reveals that most of CCTV’s material may not be directly problematic in a disinformation context. Some footage may be highly relevant to news organisations, as it originates from China proper and offers coverage of current events and Chinese political statements that might not otherwise be available.

As opposed to most other feed items, they are however not subject to any editorial control by the news agencies. There is therefore a real danger that both subtle and not so subtle

techniques are being used to amplify Beijing’s foreign policy agenda, often in concert with parallel influence campaigns conducted on social media platforms. In particular, this appears to be the case in material originating from CCTV bureaus outside China.<sup>6</sup>

CCTV’s use of sources is perhaps the main area of concern. In several of the items analysed, foreign “experts” on various international topics are used. Some of these people commenting on issues such as US politics, Covid-19 and military affairs are also frequently used in outlets such as Russia’s state media RT. Most of these so-called experts seem to have a marginal footprint in their home countries and appear to have been chosen for ideological reasons – because they are sufficiently critical towards their own system of government, or because they are directly or indirectly employed by Chinese state-controlled institutions such as think tanks or universities. Sometimes, the sources appear to be purely fictional characters, which I will return to shortly.

In some CCTV items, we see that state media from other authoritarian countries such as RT in Russia are used directly as sources, which is also a practice well below the standards of most Western media outlets. Other times, one comes across items where there is no source referencing at all. In short, most of the “journalism” behind CCTV’s vast contribution to international news agencies is hard to trust.

For the most part, the political influence that the CPC seems to be seeking through its CCTV subsidiary is subtle, taking forms that may not be easy to recognise. However, based on the items sampled here, an impression clearly emerged that more heavy-handed propaganda was given an increasing role during the summer of 2021. A documentary series distributed by Reuters on the occasion

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<sup>6</sup> Zachery Cohen, ‘Pro-China misinformation operation attempting to exploit US Covid divisions, report says’, *CNN*, 8 September 2021.

of the CPC's centenary is a prime example: 24 episodes featured between June and August 2021 praised the supremacy of Chinese culture, science, politics and many other spheres of society involving phrases such as:

*For some Westerners, China's government has been a synonym for "autocracy," but data shows that its leadership is deeply rooted in the masses of the people ... Today's China, under the leadership of the CPC, is showing its advantages to the fullest extent as a socialist country with Chinese characteristics. And the CPC's leadership is the answer.<sup>7</sup>*

Democracy activists in Hong Kong would hardly agree with such a claim and in general, heavy-handed propaganda like this will stand a slim chance of changing Western audiences' attitudes towards China.

However, in my analysis, there was a third type of content that stands somewhat between these subtle and exaggerated messages: campaigns. By this, I mean content that offers continuing emphasis on one specific topic over a relatively short period, but from different angles. In the middle of July 2021, a massive CCTV campaign appeared in the international newsfeeds, focusing heavily on international – and in particular US – efforts to investigate the origins of Covid-19. Several Western and Russian commentators were enrolled to substantiate the claim that the very idea of a Chinese lab leak was absurd and that any theory to the contrary should be considered a result of foreign policy goals, cynicism or stupidity. Between 26 July and 31 July, no less than 16 separate CCTV items on this theme were distributed by Reuters, some of them produced in a quasi-objective form and some thick with demagoguery, bearing headlines such as:

*US politicization of COVID-19 origin tracing doomed to fail*

<sup>7</sup> From the documentary series, *Making a New China*, 1921-2021, Reuters TV, 5 June 2021

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*Poisoning the world, the US should stop blaming others*

*WHO's COVID-19 origin-tracing plan on "lab leak theory" a disrespect for common sense<sup>8</sup>*

Towards the end of that same week, the CCTV rhetoric was sharpened a notch and something resembling an information attack was mounted, with specific counter allegations pointed at the US. These were focused on the conspiracy theory that the US Army's facilities at Fort Detrick, Maryland, were still being used to produce biological weapons, among them Covid-19.<sup>9</sup> At the same time, this "alternative lab leak theory" featured heavily in the domestic Chinese state-controlled press.<sup>10</sup> In CCTV's items, sources were scant but the material showed old newspaper clips and the cover of books about Fort Detrick's Cold War history in an attempt to prove the case. In addition, it referred to an allegedly spontaneous signature campaign on Chinese social media where 20 million concerned citizens appeared to be demanding a full international investigation.

This is one of several examples from my samples that contain what must be characterised as pure disinformation. Another even more sinister instance of that was discovered in the news agencies' feeds a few days later.

In a further escalation of the Covid-19 story, CCTV presented a story with what appeared to be a respected Wes-

<sup>8</sup> CCTV content analysed between 26 August and 31 August 2021.

<sup>9</sup> The US ceased production of biological weapons in 1969 at the order of President Richard Nixon. On 25 March 1975 the US ratified the International Treaty on Chemical Arms, BTWC.

<sup>10</sup> BBC, 'Wuhan lab leak theory: How Fort Detrick became a centre for Chinese conspiracies', 23 August 2021.

tern expert hitting back at US “politicised” attempts to link the coronavirus with a Chinese lab. This came in the form of Swiss biologist “Wilson Edwards”, who had supposedly written a Facebook post about the “unscientific” attempts to link the virus to Chinese negligence. Between 2 August and 10 August, six Reuters and Associated Press items discussed the Swiss professor’s sensational attack on the US. Again, this happened in parallel with a massive domestic Chinese coverage of the affair. However, this coverage suddenly disappeared when the Swiss embassy in Beijing chose to publish on Twitter that Wilson Edwards’ Facebook profile had been recently created, that it had only two followers and that the biologist in all probability didn’t exist: “the Embassy of Switzerland must unfortunately inform the Chinese public that this news is false”.<sup>11</sup>

Following a pattern seen in other authoritarian states’ influence operations, there is every reason to suspect that Chinese state organisations had created this persona on Facebook to corroborate their claims. Ever since 2014, similar campaigns have originated in Russia and subsequently been amplified by state media like RIA-FAN, RT and Sputnik News to spread disinformation among Western audiences.<sup>12</sup>

### The Potential for Manipulation

It is difficult to overstate the importance of Associated Press and Reuters as agenda setters and providers of journalistic material from parts of the world where clients may have no access themselves. The agencies are “... the major force deciding what ends up on television screens from abroad,” as stated by a British television news editor.<sup>13</sup>

While the agencies’ intentions might have been the best

11 Suranjana Tewari, ‘China: Swiss embassy urges media to remove scientist fake news’, *BBC*, 11 August 2021.

12 Øystein Bogen, *Russlands Hemmelige Krig Mot Vesten*, (Kagge, 2018).

13 C. Paterson, “Global Television News Services”. *In Media in a Global Context: A Reader* (Arnold, 1997) pp. 145-161.

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when they decided to include unfiltered CCTV material into their international feeds in 2011, this report shows how the Chinese state broadcaster now uses that access to distribute hard-handed propaganda as well as disinformation, fake sources and conspiracy theories. This creates a continuing danger that Western media organisations may end up broadcasting what is now commonly known as “fake news” to their audiences, without the intention to do so.

The peril lies not so much in the sophistication of the material, but rather in the sheer volume that is currently making its way into the newsfeeds of Associated Press and Reuters. Factors including ever-present deadlines and time constraints combined with inexperience, lack of competence or the possibility of newsroom accidents all increase the likelihood that foreign audiences will be exposed to Chinese influence operations or disinformation. Based on the newsfeed sample analysed in this report, there is a clear impression that the CPC is stepping up its efforts, aiming to expand the share of CCTV items available in these news agency feeds. There is also the possibility that future content will be made with more sophistication than at present, thus making its opinion changing efforts even harder to spot or resist for clients.

News production remains a costly enterprise, and newsrooms across the globe are constantly searching for free or cheap content – and this is exactly what China has to offer. As mentioned, CCTV’s output has high production value and is often submitted with English voice-overs, making it more or less ready to air in markets where receivers have less concern for journalism ethics.

Russia's attempts at political influence have been well-documented over the past few years, and many Western editors seem to be aware of the dangers involving Russian state media actors such as RT and Sputnik News. However, there is much less awareness about Chinese influence efforts. As it turns out, China has also managed to do something Russia never did: namely, to inject its political messaging directly into international newsfeeds in exchange for money. Despite this, there has been little public recognition or discussion about the phenomenon.

This small-scale survey demonstrates the urgent need for further research. Today, it is possible to digitally track how specific video feeds circulate through content watermarking. An analysis built on such data would serve to disclose how much CCTV content ends up in the news streams of different audiences. Qualitative interviews with members of those audiences might shed light on how they react to the material and whether their opinions have been altered as a result. It would also be of interest to analyse the diffe-

rent narratives that CCTV pushes into the newsfeeds and compare them to the CPC's stated foreign policy agenda and priorities at any given time.

By giving CCTV free reign to disseminate material under its umbrella of journalistic integrity, the news agencies have exposed Western audiences to a Chinese trojan horse. In the words of John Jirik, they were "... trading on their names and reputations in providing the material."<sup>14</sup>

While gladly accepting money in return for placement, news agencies are ignoring Beijing's infringements on the democratic principles they otherwise embrace. Through these deals, the CPC has gained an access to Western audiences that other authoritarian regimes probably envy. But having seen how money has opened these doors, what would stop states such as Russia or Iran from attempting to get their own access in the years to come?

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<sup>14</sup> John Jirik (2015) p. 201.