

BEYOND PROPAGANDA | JUNE 2015

The New Authoritarians: Ruling Through Disinformation Thought Work in China

Executive Summary

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Propaganda has deep roots in China, where the Communist Party has always regarded it as key to controlling society and maintaining stability. However, China's modernisation has given rise to new socio-economic challenges, leading the regime to rethink its approach—both ideologically and technologically.

Centralised messaging is essential to China's propaganda strategy. Recently the regime has begun to emphasise deliberately contradictory ideas to promote nationalist sentiments and loyalty. Veneration for history, culture, and tradition, are coupled with the promotion of a modern, powerful, state.

Schools continue to be instrumental in pushing the regime's messaging. While educated youth may not necessarily buy into the propaganda, research shows that it is effective as a method to deter dissent.

In media, Chinese propagandists have been able to adapt to modern technologies. They recognise that some bad news is necessary for credibility, though do still draw the line at criticism of the policymaking elite. And while the government wields various tactics to limit online access to 'vulgar content' and attacks on 'core Chinese values', the main concern is horizontal communication, which could lead to mass protest. Here, China pursues a balanced strategy that relaxes enough control over personal expression to satisfy the masses, yet controls information that could inspire collective action. China has an array of tools to ensure it remains able to monitor and control popular communication—from managing content access and spinning information, to laws that compel self-censorship and control down through society.

Ultimately, the Chinese Communist party has tried to reconcile capitalism, communism, tradition and modernity. Its methods, which range from old-fashioned party posters to the Great Firewall, have provided a dynamic example of the modern propaganda state.