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DISINFORMATION IN THE GLOBAL SOUTH

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Disinformation in the Global South

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"Rumor-Debunking" as a Propaganda and Censorship Strategy in China

The Case of the COVID-19 Outbreak

Kecheng Fang

Introduction

On New Year's Day 2020, police in the city of Wuhan in Central China issued a statement saying that eight people were summoned and punished for "spreading false information" about pneumonia (Zhuang 2020). The state news agency, Xinhua, picked up the story and claimed that according to an investigation by local public health authorities, "no significant human-to-human transmission was found." Xinhua also relayed Wuhan police's call "not to make rumors, not to believe in rumors, not to spread rumors, and to build a harmonious and clean cyberspace together" (Liao and Feng 2020). In late January, however, people began to realize that the pneumonia was rapidly spreading and that one of the punished Wuhan citizens was an ophthalmologist named Li Wenliang, who warned his former medical school classmates of "seven cases of severe acute respiratory syndrome (SARS) from the city's Hua'nan Seafood Wholesale Market" in a WeChat – a widely used social media platform in China – group chat on December 30, 2019 (Zhuang 2020). Dr. Li got the information because he examined a medical report of a patient infected by a novel coronavirus, but the police and state media dismissed his warning as "spreading false information." When Dr. Li died from COVID-19 on February 7, Chinese netizens expressed unprecedented grief and anger online and even openly called for freedom of speech on social media (Yu 2020).

It was ironic that a doctor who sent an early warning of the coronavirus was punished as a rumor-monger. But the Chinese state's efforts in controlling information by determining truth and falsity did not stop there. In fact, to censor unwanted messages and guide public opinion in the name of "rumor-debunking" (*pi yao*) and "fact-checking" was a major strategy used by the Chinese propaganda machine during the COVID-19 pandemic. The state kept rolling out "fact-checking" articles about the pandemic and promoted them on major social media platforms including Weibo and WeChat. This co-optation of fact-checking is among a global trend of politicians mimicking fact-checkers' work in order to gain credibility and promote biased information (Funke and Benkelman 2019). This trend on the one hand shows the power of fact-checking as a tool to influence the information environment, but on the other hand it points to the potential danger of an accountability tool being repurposed for the opposite goal – misleading the public, rather than informing them and holding the politicians accountable.

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Despite its importance in both practical and theoretical senses, to date, the co-optation of fact-checking by political power is still largely understudied as compared with other political aspects of disinformation and fact-checking. In this chapter, I aim to fill this gap by using the case of China's propaganda during the COVID-19 pandemic to explore how this co-optation occurred and how the government positioned fact-checking in its authoritarian governance.

Rumors, Facts, and the Power and Authority to Speak

There are different approaches to understanding rumors. The simple and intuitive understanding is that rumors, as opposed to factual claims, are something circulating in society but unverified and without solid evidence. Early psychological studies on rumors generally follow this approach (e.g., Allport and Postman 1947; Peterson and Gist 1951). However, sociologists argue that rumors should be understood not as an object but as a process. In other words, rumors are not something ready-made and waiting to be transmitted. Rather, rumors emerge, evolve, and disseminate among people due to certain social contexts. One significant study from this perspective is Shibutani's (1966) book which long precedes the current preoccupation with mis- and disinformation, in which he calls rumors "improvised news." Shibutani argues that in situations of ambiguity, people need information to solve the problems and evaluate possible actions; and when such needed information is unavailable, people would respond by collectively constructing consensus based on available data, guesses, beliefs, and speculation. This is how rumors, or "improvised news," emerge in a society. It says more about the context than about the content. This approach demonstrates that rumor can be seen as a collective tool for the public to navigate through adverse situations. It is especially relevant to both the COVID-19 pandemic, when there were many unknowns and uncertainties especially during the early days, and the Global South context, where factual information is often suppressed, unavailable, or inaccessible.

Furthermore, there is a political approach to understanding rumors. Similar to the sociological approach, the political approach chooses not to focus on the content and factuality of rumors. It instead emphasizes the power dynamic between those who define rumors and those who are defined as rumor-mongers. One commonly accepted feature of the so-called rumors is that they are not validated by official sources. However, as Kapferer (1990) suggests, "the notion of an 'official' source is a political notion: it is governed by a consensus about who has the juridical authority to speak" (p. 14). Therefore, rumor-mongers and rumor-debunkers could be seen in the framework of contesting the power and authority to speak. Kapferer further argues that rumors challenge the authority of the "official sources" by suggesting alternative narratives and questioning the underlying assumption that "official" equals "credible." "As information that runs alongside and at times counter to official information, rumors constitute a counter-power, i.e., a sort of check on power" (p. 14). Or in Hu's (2009) words, rumors are a form of social protest against the authorities of official sources. Empirical evidence does show that rumors could decrease citizens' trust in the government and support of the regime (Huang 2017). Rumors are even said to have ignited the Velvet Revolution in Czechoslovakia in 1989 (Bilefsky 2009). Thus,

the efforts to discredit rumors are not simply about righting the wrong, but about maintaining authority and containing challengers. Coady (2012) even argues that "rumor's bad reputation is a consequence of propaganda" and that "the propagandistic nature of official campaigns to discredit rumor has long been evident" (p. 105).

The global emergence of fact-checking among the professional journalism community is also largely concerned with the authority to speak, though the news media and journalists in democratic regimes carefully maintain an independent position from the government and the public. Scholars find that fact-checking projects in Western democracies have various strategies in establishing their jurisdictional authority. On the one hand, they attest to their independence from powerful political and economic interests in their mission statements (Graves 2018). When selecting claims to check, they overwhelmingly pay attention to speeches made by political figures, rather than those by private citizens or news outlets (Graves 2016). In doing so, fact-checkers resort to the widely accepted central logic of journalistic professionalism – holding the powerful accountable and thus gaining authority among the public. On the other hand, fact-checking projects generally follow the principle of transparency by providing links to external sources and explaining their methodology (Humprecht 2020). The methods used by fact-checkers usually include tracing original data, locating trustworthy experts, and triangulation by considering information from different sides (Graves 2016). Although few fact-checkers claim to use scientifically rigorous methods, they overwhelmingly reach similar conclusions and rate claims accurately (Amazeen 2015). In short, professional fact-checkers have largely established their authority not by catering to power, but by keeping a distance from political and economic interests, adopting a set of specific methods, and keeping the methods transparent. It should be noted that such strategy does not apply to the context of China, where even the critical journalists would partner with the state to carry out investigative reporting to help improve governance rather than enacting opposition, as independent space for journalism is not allowed in China (Repnikova 2018b).

However, once the authority is established, it could be misappropriated by various actors. Funke and Benkelman (2019) note that there is a growing number of imposter fact-checking websites in many countries trying to spread biased information by impersonating legitimate fact-checking sites. They also find that politicians all over the world, from Senator Elizabeth Warren in the US to prime ministerial candidate Andrej Babiš in the Czech Republic, have created their own fact-checking sites to debunk allegations against them. The Russian disinformation campaign also used "rumor-debunking" to disseminate fake and biased news (Birnbaum 2019). Among this global trend, the Chinese government's co-optation of fact-checking is arguably the most significant one, and is one of the latest attempts of China's propaganda apparatus to upgrade its operations in the digital era.

How the Chinese Propaganda Machine Claims Authority

For authoritarian regimes, managing information flows is key to their survival. It is not enough to just send out messages favorable to the government – they have to make sure that the people are willing to listen to and believe in such messages. In other words, they have to establish authority and credibility for the official information

channels. In the context of China, the party-state implements a variety of strategies to establish the authority of the propaganda machine for more effective "thought work" (Brady 2008) in different periods.

In the Mao era (1949–1976), the major strategy was a more totalitarian one – to monopolize information channels with official mouthpieces such as *The People's Daily* (*Renmin Ribao*) and to shut down other channels such as private newspapers and underground magazines (Sukosd and Wang 2013). The economic reform since the late 1970s started a significant process of media commercialization, which gave birth to thousands of state-owned but market-oriented media outlets (Chan 1993; Huang 2001). Not relying on government funding, this group of commercial media in China has brought partial liberalization to the media landscape, including the rise of investigative journalism and the diversification of opinions (Liebman 2005; Pan 2009). Scholars argue that commercial media eroded the party media's reader base and challenged their authority (Chen and Guo 1998; Huang 2001). However, it does not necessarily mean that the Chinese government has lost its authority and control over information flow. A seminal study by Stockmann (2013) finds that although commercial media seem to be different from official mouthpieces, their coverage of key policy issues is actually quite similar to each other, and both support government positions. The fact that commercial media outlets are more popular and are perceived as more credible among the public has increased the authority and persuasiveness of the official narratives. Therefore, authoritarian rule in China is strengthened rather than weakened through the process of media commercialization.

The proliferation of blogs and social media accounts as unofficial information channels in the digital era brought new challenges to the regime. The internet facilitated the exchange of information among the public and gave rise to online activism, threatening the authority of official channels (Tong and Lei 2013; Yang 2009). The party-state responded with both crackdown (Bamman, O'Connor, and Smith 2012; Roberts 2018) and co-optation, which includes a range of sophisticated approaches to using digital media to claim authority for official propaganda. First, it has created a number of digital-only outlets to disseminate propagandistic content in a more accessible way and a more appealing style (Repnikova and Fang 2019). There is also a significant presence of official media and government institutions on social media platforms such as Weibo and WeChat (Schlæger and Jiang 2014). Second, the party-state has established an army of pro-government commentators known as the "fifty-cent party" to engage anonymously in online discussion and publish pro-regime content (Han 2015). Acting as ordinary netizens, this group of government-sponsored users artificially boosts the perceived popularity of official narratives among the public. Third, the Chinese government takes advantage of the interactive feature of social media and adopts the strategy of participatory persuasion, in which the netizens are called to repost, share, and create content for propaganda purposes (Repnikova and Fang 2018). Including the netizens in the persuasion process, could be an effective way to enhance the authority of official discourse and facilitate public complicity with the regime. Taken together, these different approaches show that the Chinese government keeps upgrading its propaganda apparatus by creatively exploiting the features of online communication (more accessible, anonymous, and interactive), which help bolster the legitimacy and authority of official discourse.

In terms of crackdown on online speech, the government also has to care about legitimacy and authority, otherwise censorship might backfire (Roberts 2018). Defining unwanted messages as rumors is a major strategy used by the Chinese government to provide legitimacy to censorship practices. Anti-rumor campaigns have been organized by the government to silence public discussion on politically sensitive topics (Zeng, Chan, and Fu 2017). The government even issued a legal interpretation, which would put social media users under defamation charges and possible prison terms if the "rumors" they produce have been viewed more than 5,000 times or shared more than 500 times (Huang 2017). However, the campaigns are hardly successful in eliminating rumors, and one major reason is the lack of trust in traditional sources of information (Repnikova 2018a). It is against this backdrop that the Chinese government co-opts fact-checking as a way to establish authority and credibility. In this chapter, I examine such co-optation and focus on the COVID-19 sections on two prominent Chinese fact-checking websites, as well as the official documents and policy narratives about rumor-debunking and fact-checking.

Two Major COVID-19 Rumor-Debunking Sites

How did the Chinese party-state co-opt fact-checking for propagating official discourses and filtering unwanted information during the COVID-19 pandemic? I argue that it focused on taking the name and form, rather than the independent stance and professional practices, from fact-checking journalism. It also combined "fact-checking" with censorship and crackdown on information that was deemed sensitive by the state. My argument is based on the analysis of the following data from several different sources.

The primary data source is two fact-checking websites focusing on the COVID-19 pandemic. The first one is the COVID-19 section of the Joint Rumor-Debunking Platform (referred to as "The Joint" hereafter) hosted by the Cyberspace Administration of China and managed by the website of state news agency Xinhua Net (http://www.piyao.org.cn/2020yqpy).[1] The second data source is the COVID-19 section of the commercial platform Tencent News's Jiao Zhen site (https://vp.fact.qq.com). These two sites are the most prominent fact-checking outlets on this topic, respectively run by the government and a commercial company. A comparison between the two could help examine whether the phenomenon of commercial media contributing to pro-government propaganda identified by Stockmann (2013) still holds true in this context.

I collected two types of data from the two sites. First, I examined the interface including the design and structure of the sites and the composition of fact-checking articles. I compared them to three professional fact-checkers in the US: PolitiFact, FactCheck.org, and Snopes. Second, a research assistant and I conducted a content analysis on the articles. We collected articles published every other day from January 18 to June 30, producing a sample of 484 articles from The Joint and 329 articles from Jiao Zhen. We found that their content has some overlap – 62 articles appeared on both sites. We then coded the time of publication, the author of the piece, the information source cited in the piece, the rating of the checked claim, and its topical area for the 751 individual articles (484 + 329 – 362).

1 The URL for The Joint uses the Chinese word *piyao*, meaning "rumor-debunking."

The secondary data of the study are from two sources. First, I collected all the articles mentioning "coronavirus (*xin guan*)" or "pandemic (*yi qing*)" published on the website of the Cyberspace Administration of China (http://www.cac.gov.cn), the government agency in charge of internet policies and regulations. These articles provide a lens through which we could examine the official position and policies about rumor-debunking during the pandemic. Second, I used the "List of Penalized Chinese Netizens for Online Speech about COVID-19" collected by the non-governmental organization Chinese Human Rights Defenders.[2] This dataset used Chinese state media reports and government announcements to gather cases. It provides insights into how rumor-debunking is also linked to repression, which could supplement our analysis on fact-checking websites.

Similarity with Professional Fact-Checkers and Lack of Transparency

We start our findings section by examining the form, including the interface and design of the websites and the structure of the articles, in order to analyze their practices and reveal their underlying logic. Both The Joint and Jiao Zhen have a rather simple and even minimal layout, which is helpful for reading on mobile phones. The main pages list the headlines with ratings in different colors. The headlines are checked claims written either as questions (The Joint) or as statements (Jiao Zhen). Both sites adopt an "infinite scroll" design – more headlines are continually loaded into the page as the user scrolls downwards or clicks the "read more" button.

Figure 8.1 presents a side-by-side comparison of the two Chinese sites and the American fact-checking site, PolitiFact. The three sites look quite similar, especially for the colored ratings placed next to the checked claims. All of them use green to denote claims rated as truth, and the words used are "fact" (The Joint), "indeed like this" (Jiao Zhen), and "true" (PolitiFact). Claims checked to be false are in red ratings,

Figure 8.1 Website layouts of The Joint (left), Jiao Zhen (middle), and PolitiFact (right). (*Sources*: The Joint [left]; Jiao Zhen [middle]; POLITIFACT [TampaBayTimes] [right].)

2 The list is available at https://www.nchrd.org/2020/04/a-healthy-society-should-not-have-just-one-voice-china-must-end-crackdown-on-online-speech-in-response-to-covid-19.

and the words used are "false rumor" (the two Chinese sites) and "false" (PolitiFact). Those rated between true and false are in other colors – orange for The Joint (the word is "misleading"), gray for Jiao Zhen (the word is "no conclusion"), and orange for PolitiFact.

One obvious difference between the Chinese sites and the US site is that there is no explanation on methodology for The Joint and Jiao Zhen, whereas PolitiFact and other major fact-checking sites provide detailed notes on how they choose and rate the claims. The transparency of "showing your work" (Graves 2017) is regarded as an important strategy of winning audience trust among fact-checkers. The lack of transparency for the Chinese sites might suggest that Chinese sites are more interested in adopting the appearance of Western fact-checking sites than following its methodological approach.

The difference between the official site and the commercial site emerges when we examine the format of fact-checking articles published on the sites. As shown in Figure 8.2, articles on The Joint are simply in the format of ordinary news articles, whereas Jiao Zhen publishes articles in the format similar to Western fact-checkers such as

Figure 8.2 Article page layouts of The Joint (upper left), Jiao Zhen (lower left), and Snopes (right). (*Sources*: The Joint [upper left]; Jiao Zhen [lower left]; Snopes Media Group Inc [right].)

Snopes, which is shown in the figure as an example. Both Jiao Zhen's and Snopes' articles are structured to include the sections checked claim, rating (with color), and detailed explanation. This finding aligns with previous studies which suggest that commercial media in China are more professional in terms of journalism practices than their official counterparts (Huang 2001; Stockmann 2013).

However, articles published on the commercial Jiao Zhen fail to match those on Western fact-checking sites in terms of transparency. There is no link to external documents or source materials, failing to meet an essential transparency requirement (Humprecht 2020). Combined with the fact that Jiao Zhen does not provide any explanations on methodology, we could see that even the commercial fact-checking site in China is better at creating an appearance similar to professional fact-checkers than honing its practices. This might, on the one hand, be due to the lack of space for independent journalism to develop, and on the other hand, be attributed to the specific political culture in China where the legitimacy of truth often comes from the status of sources rather than from the rigor of procedures.

Propaganda Content Disguised as Fact-Checking

Next, we examine the content of the fact-checking articles published on The Joint and Jiao Zhen. There are some findings that clearly suggest the controlled nature of the sites. There was only one piece mentioning the initial cover-up of the deadly virus in China, and it firmly denied the cover-up.[3] In contrast to many US fact-checkers who focus on politicians and often rate their claims as false, these Chinese sites are mostly interested in checking the messages spread by ordinary netizens, and all of the claims questioning the Chinese government's response to the pandemic were rated as false. Although some fact-checkers in democratic countries such as Africa Check and AFP's Fact Check also rate social media posts by citizens, their verdicts are far from uniformly approving the government. Figure 8.3 shows the amount of articles published every other day from January 18 to June 30. The trend looks quite similar for the two sites, where most of the articles were published during January and February, the initial outbreak and the worst months for China. However, we could also notice some differences between the two sites.

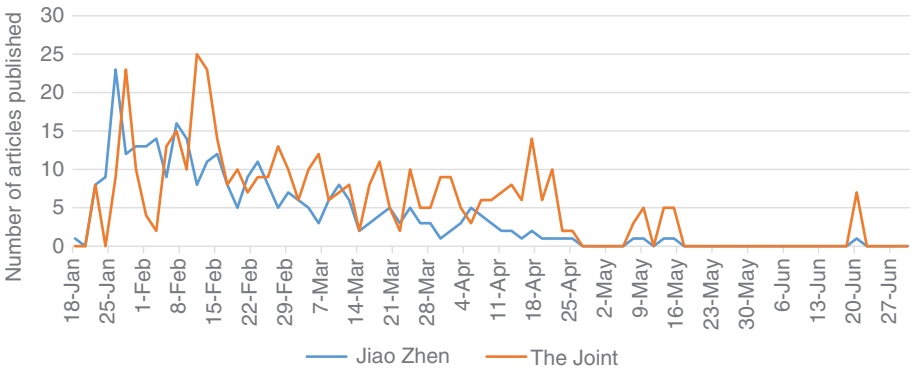

Figure 8.3 Time series of fact-checking articles on the two sites.

3 http://www.piyao.org.cn/2020-04/28/c_1210594087.htm (in Chinese).

First, there is a lag between the two sites during the first month – The Joint's initial response to the pandemic was slower than Jiao Zhen. It indicates that commercial media act more promptly than official media during crises, though the two platforms have a comparable length of history – Jiao Zhen was launched in 2017 and The Joint in 2018. The lag may also be explained by the "time window" of crisis reporting in China, which refers to the phenomenon that it takes time for the propaganda authorities to react and adjust their control when crises happen, whereas commercial media could use this opportunity to conduct reporting in a relatively freer environment (Repnikova 2017). A piece of supporting evidence for this explanation is the change in the topical areas of checked claims. The Joint consistently published more articles on government responses and policies than on the scientific facts about the virus and the ways to prevent the spread of the disease. But Jiao Zhen's topical composition changed significantly, The majority (74.3%) of the articles published during the first month were about the virus and disease prevention, and only 18.6% were about government responses, but articles published since March were overwhelmingly (71.2%) about how the government handled the pandemic – and all in a positive direction. This change suggests that Jiao Zhen as a commercial site initially tried to publish some independent reporting on the virus (since reporting on the political aspects such as the initial cover-up is always a forbidden topic, they chose to focus on the scientific aspect), but was under greater pressure from the government to propagate the official positions since March.

Second, while Jiao Zhen had a low frequency of publishing during April, The Joint was quite active. China's pandemic situation had already stabilized in April, with less than 100 newly confirmed cases for most of the days.[4] Then why did The Joint still publish more than five fact-checking articles per day? A closer look at the articles reveals that most of the pieces were debunking claims about local outbreaks in certain cities and towns all over China (e.g., Fushun city in the northern province of Liaoning, Guangzhou in southern China, Zhuji city in the eastern province of Zhejiang, and Hepu county in Guangxi in southwestern China).[5] Those rumors only circulated within respective areas and did not attract national attention, but local governments issued statements repudiating such claims, and The Joint reposted such statements as fact-checking pieces. In essence, these articles are simply government press releases with added headlines and ratings in color.

Third, both sites remained largely silent since June, but published several articles around June 20, most of which appeared on The Joint. This was related to an outbreak linked to the Xinfadi wholesale market in Beijing since June 16. Again, both sites strictly toed the government line and acted as disseminators of official statements rather than professional fact-checkers. Taken together, the fluctuations in the amount of fact-checking articles published on the two websites indicate tightening censorship and the increasingly proficient use of fact-checking as a propaganda strategy by state media.

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4 https://covid19.who.int/region/wpro/country/cn.

5 http://www.piyao.org.cn/2020-04/19/c_1210577447.htm,http://www.piyao.org.cn/2020-04/13/c_1210555699.htm, http://www.piyao.org.cn/2020-04/05/c_1210545289.htm, and http://www.piyao.org.cn/2020-04/17/c_1210562145.htm (in Chinese).

We can further look into the sources cited in the fact-checking pieces. For The Joint, most (63.0%) of the cited sources were government organizations, and a small portion (11.2%) were experts. The commercial Jiao Zhen had more expert sources (46.2%) and fewer government sources (20.4%), and that mainly resulted from the pieces on the scientific aspects published in the early days. In terms of source triangulation, the articles published in The Joint (90.3%) and Jiao Zhen (87.8%) overwhelmingly cited only one source, failing to meet the conventional standard of validating information from multiple independent sources. It is also important to note that when government organizations were cited as the source, no additional sources were provided, suggesting that the government had a monopoly over deciding what is true on these two sites.

Two examples further illustrate the questionable practice of following the government's narratives to render verdicts. On June 9, The Joint published a piece rating the claim "the relations between China and foreign countries have turned more negative due to the pandemic" as "false rumor."[6] The piece cited the white paper "Fighting COVID-19: China in Action" published by China's State Council Information Office[7] and vice-minister of Foreign Affairs Ma Zhaoxu's comments during the press conference of the white paper as the only sources. Ma declared that "our relations with friends have become more close, and our circle of friends has grown – this is a fact." He also claimed that "the international community overwhelmingly praise China for our contribution to the international cooperation in fighting COVID-19." No other sources, for example, comments from scholars, think-tanks, and diplomats from other countries, were provided to support the official claims and justify the rating.

Another example includes several pieces on the scientific aspect of the virus and disease published in Jiao Zhen. The site checked at least eight claims about the effectiveness of traditional Chinese medicine in treating COVID-19, and the ratings were mostly "no conclusion." For example, the claim that "Jeeryin (translates as 'Clean genitals'), a female antibacterial lotion, can be used to prevent the disease such as SARS" was rated as "no conclusion." The fact-checking piece was written by a pharmacist, who suggested that there was no solid academic study supporting the efficacy of the lotion.[8] This argument could have rendered a verdict against the claim, but Jiao Zhen chose a more conservative rating without taking a side. It is widely known that President Xi Jinping is a fervent supporter of traditional Chinese medicine, and there are state-led campaigns to not only promote the medicine domestically and punish Chinese citizens who criticize it, but also promote it as a remedy for COVID-19 globally (Davidson 2020). Jiao Zhen's ambivalent ratings on this topic likely resulted from the fear of angering the authorities.

In sum, though self-labeled as "fact-checking," the two sites publish content that largely follows the propaganda orientation by relying on government sources and adopting the official lines. The commercial Jiao Zhen acted more promptly and did some independent reporting on the softer topics of the scientific aspects of the virus, but the room shrank after the initial short time window.

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6 http://www.piyao.org.cn/2020-06/09/c_1210652783.htm (in Chinese).

7 http://english.www.gov.cn/news/topnews/202006/07/content_ws5edc559ac6d066592a449030.html.

8 https://vp.fact.qq.com/article?id=bdaf431cde29101911d075504d4a64b8 (in Chinese).

Rumor-Debunking as a Weapon in the War of Information

After analyzing the form and content of the two sites, we move to the examination of related policy directives by the Cyberspace Administration, which hosts The Joint and supervises all Chinese websites including Jiao Zhen. Three common themes could be identified from the articles on the COVID-19 pandemic published on the Cyberspace Administration's website from January to June 2020.

First, the urgency to manage and control information about the pandemic is regarded as a war no less important than the war on COVID-19 itself. Phrases such as "holding the line of defense of online public opinion" (*shouzhu wangluo yuqing fangxian*) and "Blow the Trumpet! Call the Assembly!" (*chuixiang jijiehao*) frequently appeared in the official articles.[9] The enemies, according to the government directives, were online rumors that threatened to cause panic among the netizens and destabilize society. The victory was described as the wide spread of "positive energy," which is a popular official discourse persuading people to think positively about the status quo (Chen and Wang 2019). Seeing through the frame of a war of information, the efforts to eliminate rumors are ultimately for protecting the regime from unwanted doubts and criticisms, rather than seeking facts for facts' sake.

Second, internet platforms and major portal websites were expected to take part in the war on rumors. According to the Cyberspace Administration, the primary responsibility to contain the spread of rumors was on the shoulders of the platforms and websites where the rumors were posted and shared. An article praised Tencent Jiao Zhen's special section on the pandemic as an example of how tech companies could "give play to their own advantages" in order to "treat people's minds."[10] Other examples included Weibo, WeChat, and Douyin, all of which used private messages and push notifications to promote certain rumor-debunking articles. These tech giants were lauded as "the stabilizer of people's hearts" (*renxin wendingqi*) in this war.

Third, the articles emphasized the combination of co-optation and repression. One piece that summarized a provincial Cyberspace Administration's work during the pandemic suggested that the government should "grab with both hands" – on the one hand, proactively publishing certain information, and on the other hand, cracking down on those who "deliberately made up and spread rumors to destabilize the society."[11] The latter, according to the article, was made possible by the collaborations between the Cyberspace Administration and Public Security Bureau. During a press conference on February 21, the Public Security Ministry announced that police all over China had already processed 5,511 cases of "fabricating and deliberately disseminating fake and harmful information."[12] Data collected by Chinese Human Rights Defenders showed that the most common punishments were administrative detention (up to 15 days) and "educational reprimand," which refers to oral and public admonition. However, there were also a few cases ending up with criminal charges. Most of the cases happened in late January and early February, which was also when most of

9 E.g., http://www.cac.gov.cn/2020-03/04/c_1584866270391773.htm and http://www.cac.gov.cn/2020-04/13/c_1588323943295608.htm (in Chinese).

10 http://www.cac.gov.cn/2020-02/12/c_1583048485379308.htm (in Chinese).

11 http://www.cac.gov.cn/2020-03/04/c_1584866270391773.htm (in Chinese).

12 http://paper.people.com.cn/rmrbhwb/html/2020-02/22/content_1972481.htm (in Chinese).

the fact-checking articles were published on The Joint and Jiao Zhen. It indicates that the two "hands" were indeed coordinating with each other during this information war, promoting certain messages and suppressing others.

Taken together, the official policy directives demonstrated how rumor-debunking was regarded as an essential method in fighting against messages that threatened the stability of the society and the regime. The objectives of such efforts, as revealed by the official articles, were distinct from the missions of professional fact-checkers.

Conclusion

"I think a healthy society should not have just one voice," said Li Wenliang during an interview when he reflected on his experience of being punished for "spreading false rumors" (Green 2020). However, not much has changed regarding the way the Chinese government handled information since Li passed away in early February. The propaganda machine and the law enforcement agency continued to promote one specific version of the narrative and suppress other voices in the name of debunking rumors and seeking truth. Globally, disinformation and conspiracy theories about COVID-19 harmed society and even put lives at risk (O'Connor and Murphy 2020), but the initiatives self-labeled as "fact-checking" do not always serve the purpose of providing accurate information and informing the public. In contesting the power and authority to speak, various actors might borrow the notion of fact-checking to legitimize their claims.

In this chapter, I have examined how the Chinese government co-opted fact-checking as a way to propagate official discourses and censor unwanted information. Analyses of two prominent fact-checking sites – the official The Joint and the commercial Jiao Zhen – show that although they had a similar interface and even similar article structure as global professional fact-checkers, their content overwhelmingly relied on single government sources and strictly toed the official lines, in sharp contrast to the professional fact-checkers in democratic regimes. While the commercial site enjoyed a limited degree of independence during the early days of the outbreak, its difference from the official site diminished as the control on media tightened. Official documents and policy directives further illustrate that the government regarded the war on rumors that threatened social and regime stability as important as the war on the pandemic itself. Social media platforms and portal websites were designated with the task to eliminate such information and promote official messages. The propaganda apparatus also worked with the police to punish thousands of individuals involved in creating and spreading those "rumors," suggesting a combined strategy of co-optation and suppression. If rumors could be seen as social protests (Hu 2009), then the war on rumors is also the crackdown on protests.

Recent developments in China's overseas publicity campaign show that the co-optation of fact-checking is not only a domestic practice. In responding to criticism on Chinese government policies from the global community, state media such as Xinhua and CGTN actively often dismiss that criticism as "false rumors" spread by Western media and politicians, and "debunk" them by citing China's official responses.[13]

13 For example, Xinhua's "rumor-debunking" on the situation in Xinjiang: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fdmmkb1kg7y; and CGTN checking US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo's claims about China: https://news.cgtn.com/news/2020-08-26/debunking-the-disinformation-in-pompeo-s-anti-chinese-diatribe-tgrylsfqja/index.html.

It remains unknown whether the fact-checking projects and the narrative of rumor-debunking have boosted the effects of official propaganda. Future studies could use surveys and experiments to tackle this question. Findings in this chapter may indicate the limitation of the current projects. The lack of triangulation from multiple sources and the absence of explanations on methodology could harm the trustworthiness of the sites, especially among more sophisticated readers. It is always more difficult to co-opt the more fundamental logics of new mediums and genres than to co-opt their appearances. The Chinese propaganda machine had a track record of adopting something new but eventually gave up due to the incompatibility between the propaganda logic and the core logic of the new medium and genres (Repnikova and Fang 2018). The fact-checking case may be no exception.

No matter how effective this strategy is, the case of the co-optation of fact-checking in China has important implications for our understanding of fact-checking and the struggle to decide what is true. It shows that a professional journalistic practice could be repurposed for very different missions. Although co-optation by the government is less likely to happen in democratic regimes, it is very likely to be used by far-right political parties and individuals, who are good at denouncing the authority of mainstream media and creating alternative narratives. Therefore, studies on fact-checking should focus not only on what is happening inside the professional fact-checker's community, but also on how organizations and individuals outside the community have been exploiting this practice to disinform rather than inform the public.

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