

Institute of Chinese Studies

# WEDNESDAY SEMINAR

*Political Echo Chambers  
and Misinformation in  
Digital China*

## REPORT

Speaker :  
**Tilak Jha**

*23 August 2023*

## SUMMARY

- The seminar focused on the mechanisms used for regulating information in China. It explored the diverse methods that have been developed by the CPC through increased technological innovation for controlling popular narratives to suit the Party line, thereby creating political echo chambers.
- According to the speaker, tackling misinformation on climate change and health policies is the top-priority, followed by national security. However, the Party has also countered economic misinformation, especially after the 2015-16 Chinese stock market turbulence, in order to curb dissent.
- Jha argued that being politically correct is not an expectation but a mandate in China. The Party has also expanded its ability to track digital information. Under Xi Jinping's regime, effective control over social media through stringent laws and censorship, as well as through the effective employment of propaganda.
- Jha concluded that strict employment of these methods and containing the public within such political echo chamber diminishes people's trust in the government. The digital medium surpasses traditional forms of communication in exposing the people to nuanced realities, and, therefore, has become a matter of continuous concern for the Party.

## REPORT

**Speaker: Dr. Tilak Jha**, Associate Professor of Journalism, Times School of Media, Bennett University, Greater Noida.

**Chair: Dr. Usha Chandran**, Assistant Professor, Jawaharlal Nehru University; Honorary Fellow, Institute of Chinese Studies, New Delhi.

Date: 23 August 2023

Venue: Zoom Webinar

The Institute of Chinese Studies, New Delhi organised a seminar on 23 August 2023, on “Political Echo Chambers and Misinformation in Digital China”. The session explored the intricacies inherent in the use of information technology by the CPC in extending its digital reach and gaining control over social, political, economic and cultural aspects discussed and disseminated in the cyber space in China.

The seminar started with a few insightful questions raised by the Chair, Dr. Usha Chandran, on the extent of state surveillance and control in China, and the impact of the same during the COVID-19 period. Dr. Jha commenced his talk by noting how propaganda had been employed in the Soviet Union, with the aim of controlling every aspect of society. According to him, China examined the reasons for Russia's failure and, leveraging its developing economic prowess, advancements in information technology and artificial intelligence, and its governance structure, succeeded on a much larger scale than Russia.

He noted how the spread of misinformation and the methods used to counter it were initially applied primarily on emerging news related to climate change and health policies, followed by national security and defense. Compared to this, the process of exerting control over political and economic information in the digital sphere took longer to come to fruition. According to the speaker, the stock market turbulence of 2015, a significant event with severe ramifications, led the government in China to pay more attention towards censorship in the economic domain.

Acknowledging that the Chinese state-media's narrative is framed by nationalist propaganda, Dr. Jha highlighted how Chinese citizens have resorted to social media to express their response in form of dissent. He posited that the Chinese government is known to crack down upon public relations firms, charities and journalists expressing their opinions that stand contrary to the state's narratives. This leads to the creation of political echo chambers.

The speaker concluded his talk by stating that misinformation is not only a problem for the citizens, but also for the Governments at large. He also argued that the use of social media in providing real-time information has led to the spread of greater awareness among the citizens. The talk concluded with a significant observation regarding the stringent utilization of various technological and legal measures to suppress dissent and divide the public, confining them within political echo chambers. This approach has led to a decrease in the public's trust in the government's narratives and agendas. Such loss of public support may create hurdles for the CPC in achieving the "dream" it has envisioned for China.

The Chair, Dr. Chandran, in her concluding remarks, expressed her views on the vibrancy of the discussions on the social media platforms in China, despite the implementation of extensive censorship, and efforts by the Government to exert control over the digital space.

In her concluding remarks, Dr. Chandran, the Chair noted that despite extensive censorship and the government's efforts to exert control over the digital space, there have been vibrant discussions on social media platforms in China. She acknowledged the creativity of the citizens in bypassing censorship, and commended the courage of the people towards opposing the state's narratives.

The talk was followed by a vibrant interactive session, where pertinent questions related to the role of artificial intelligence and perils of self-media nationalist social accounts in tackling with misinformation were raised. Both Dr. Jha and Dr. Chandran engaged with the audience, and answered their questions, while making relevant observations.

*This report is prepared by Aishwarya Acharya, Research Intern at the Institute of Chinese Studies, New Delhi.*

**Disclaimer:** This report is submitted and produced for purposes of dissemination and for generating wider discussion. All views expressed here should be understood to be those of the speaker(s) and individual participants and not necessarily of the Institute of Chinese Studies. Since this is a report, it cannot be used for citation without confirming with the speaker(s).