

Clash of Narratives: The US-China Propaganda War Amid the Global Pandemic

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Abstract

In addition to traditional spheres of competition such as military and economic rivalry, the US-China rivalry is shifting into new areas. The outbreak of Covid-19 seems to have provided yet another domain for competition to both the US and China. Aside from news related to Covid-19, propaganda around Covid-19 have dominated global discussions in the last few months. Propaganda, in the most neutral sense, means to disseminate or promote particular ideas. During the ongoing pandemic, China and the US have been involved in very intense war of words in order to influence the global narrative on Covid-19. Considering the number of narratives presented by two of the world's strongest actors, the period since the outbreak of the pandemic can be truly regarded as the age of clashing narratives. This analysis attempts to take a close look at the narratives presented by the US and China during the pandemic, consider the impact of disinformation on the day to day lives of people around the world and discuss the criticism against China and the US during the Pandemic.

Keywords

China, US, Covid-19, Propaganda, Disinformation

Harold D Lasswell (1927) defines Propaganda as ‘management of collective attitudes by manipulation of significant symbols’. In simple words, propaganda can be described as thoughts, ideas, allegations or facts, spread deliberately to further one’s own cause or with the intention of causing damage to an opposing cause. Propaganda has been the primary vehicle in China for the indoctrination and mass mobilization of citizens, ever since the Mao era. While the propaganda regime continues to attempt to guide and shape public opinion, the conventional propaganda apparatus is not as effective as it used to be. This has given rise to new mechanisms that employs internet commentators to direct cyber discussions and create favourable online opinions about the party-state.

China’s strategy of using information to achieve political goals is rooted in traditional CCP approaches.

In the US, propaganda became a common term during World War I when posters and films were leveraged against enemies to rally troop enlistment and garner the public opinion (Norwich, 2020). During the World War, propaganda was institutionalised for the first

time in the US with the creation of Committee on Public Information (CPI). A similar body called the Office of War Information (OWI) was formed during World War II. In 1945, for the first time President Harry S. Truman used propaganda activities during peacetime to combat communism. As for China, being an autocratic one party-state, China’s strategy of using information to achieve political goals is rooted in traditional Chinese Communist Party (CCP) approaches (Desai,2020).

Contemporary Chinese military literature has extensively explored the idea of ‘information dominance’ as a favourable pre-combat strategy for victory in modern warfare. This concept encapsulates CCP’s propaganda strategies, ranging from China’s ongoing global media expansion, cyber warfare, to social media disinformation campaigns (Desai, 2020). This analysis attempts to take a close look at the narratives presented by the US and China during the pandemic, consider the impact of disinformation on the day to day lives of people around the world and discuss the criticism against China and the US during the pandemic. Disinformation represents a significant threat to the countries involved and there may have numerous consequences on bilateral relations between countries in the long run.

Propaganda During the Pandemic



Source: World Affairs

In the digital age propaganda posters have been replaced by digital visuals, such as memes, that are easily produced and mass-disseminated. Today, propaganda is known by several other terms such as spin, alternative facts and fake news. During the global pandemic, social media was used by both the US and China to further their narratives on Covid-19.

On 30 April, 2020, the Chinese Embassy in France posted an animated video on Twitter which took a jibe at the US. The video titled ‘*Once upon a Virus*’ went viral immediately. In one minute and thirty-nine seconds, the short video clearly projected the Chinese perception of the US’s stance during the global pandemic. This is how the conversation in the video goes:

December

China: *Strange pneumonia cases reported*

WHO: *Roger that*

January

China: *We discovered a new virus*

US: *So What?*

China: *It's dangerous*

US: *It's only a Flu*

China: *Wear a mask*

US: *Don't wear a mask*

China: *Stay at home*

US: *It's violating Human Rights*

China: *Building Temporary Hospitals*

US: *It's a concentration camp*

China: *Built in 10 days*

US: *Show Off*

China: *Time to Lockdown*

US: *How Barbaric*

February

China: *It's overwhelming our medical system*

US: *Look how Backward China is*

China: *The Virus is killing Doctors*

US: *Typical third World*

China: *It's Airborne*

US: *It will Magically go away in April*

China: *Everyone stay at home*

US: *Violation of Human Rights*

March

China: *Our numbers are dropping now*

US: *Impossible! Look at Italy*

China: *We wore masks*

US: *You lied to us*

China: *We made our Data Public*

US: *You kept everything secret*

China: *Your people are now dying*

US: *You didn't warn us*

China: *We said it was dangerous*

US: *You lied*

April

China: *We said it was airborne*
US: *You gave us false Data. Why didn't you warn us?*
China: *We said it was dangerous*
US: *The Virus is not Dangerous but Millions of Chinese are dead even though the Virus is not dangerous. We are correct. Even though we contradict ourselves.*
China: *Gosh! Just listen to yourselves*
US: *That's right, we did nothing for three months and because the WHO agrees with China we are cutting the funding for WHO*
China: *Are you listening to yourselves?*
US: *We are always correct, even though we contradict ourselves.*
China: *That's what we love about you Americans. Your Consistency*

Image Source: Transcribed by Author

This video is one of many such attempts from China to publicly rebuke the US for its imprudence since the outbreak of the pandemic. The US for its part has left no stone unturned in blaming China for the pandemic while deflecting focus from its own inability to deal with the crisis. As of mid-July, the US had a total of 3.4 million Covid-19 cases and 136,356 deaths (The New York Times, 2020a). Apart from posting videos, the two countries are deeply involved in attempting to influence the global narrative on Covid-19 through other sources such as print, social and broadcast media.

'If the free world doesn't change Communist China, Communist China will change us' - Mike Pompeo

The obsession of the US and China to defame one another through animated videos and contemptuous tweets may seem trivial but in actuality this war of words has a much more significant impact. Propaganda is one of the most efficient tools ever used to influence global public opinion. While most parts of the world are sauntering into a series of lockdown phases, the US and China are relentlessly seeking to take control of the global narrative on Covid-19. Flooding the internet with numerous under proven theories have had negative repercussions of extreme nature on the daily lives of people. For instance, many who believe Trump's lab theory are seen to have developed an absolute aversion against China and the Chinese people.

This has consequently resulted in xenophobia and in some cases, serious hate crimes. In many US states including New York, California, and Texas, East Asians have been verbally abused, punched or kicked - and in one case even stabbed (BBC News, 2020). China meanwhile has come up with a number of articles and videos deriding the US President for his highly inefficient and discredited theory. This clash of narratives took a very serious tone when the US President attacked the World Health Organisation (WHO) calling

it the 'PR Agency of China' (The Economic Times, 2020).

The Clash of Narratives

Closely tracking the news stories and arguments coming in from China on the US and contrariwise, it is clear that both the sides have resorted to disinformation to further their interests and to tarnish one another's image as global actors. In this regard, the US President Donald Trump's relentless insistence on calling Covid-19 the "Chinese virus" tops the list. Both President Trump and the US Secretary of State, Mike Pompeo have employed languages that can be directly interpreted as racist languages during their public addresses on Covid-19. In an attempt to undermine the Chinese political system, Pompeo recently stated that 'If the free world doesn't change Communist China, Communist China will change us'. This was countered by a Chinese official, Hua Chunying who described Pompeo as an 'ant trying to shake a tree' in a "futile" attempt to "launch a new crusade against China' (Guardian, 2020).

A significant number of Indians believe that calling Covid-19 a "Chinese virus" or "Wuhan virus" is neither racist nor stigmatised

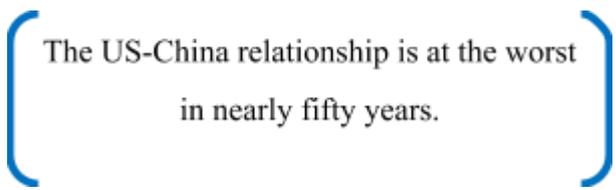
Despite facing several criticisms especially from Asian American community, Trump is persistent about calling Covid-19, the Chinese virus. The media and people in other countries have followed suit. For instance, in India the phrase 'Chinese virus' has been used several times in broadcast as well as print media (Zee News, 2020). In a survey carried out by Manoj Kewalramani from Takshashila Institution, it was concluded that a significant number of Indians believe that calling Covid-19 a "Chinese virus" or "Wuhan virus" is neither racist nor stigmatised (Kewalramani, 2020). Trump's bidding has worked to a considerable extent but the Asian American community in the US is disillusioned with the President's remarks as they fear communal disharmony. The Asian American Journalists Association has repeatedly urged media outlets to be careful in how they cover the virus, "to avoid fuelling xenophobia and racism that have already emerged since the outbreak" (AAJA,2020).

The current deputy director of the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs Information Department, Zhao Lijian shared a conspiracy theory on Twitter blaming the US for the origin of Covid-19. He tweeted that the novel coronavirus could have been brought to China from the US. As proof, he also posted a video clip where the director for the US Center for Disease Control and Prevention, Robert Redfield was seen stating that some influenza

deaths in the US were actually cases of Covid-19 (CNN, 2020). This post caused an uproar in the US as Zhao Lijian has 300,000 followers on Twitter which meant that his theory was directly viewed and shared by his large number of twitter users. On one hand the US is demanding accountability and on the other hand, China is demanding that the US release health information on delegates who had attended the Military World Games in Wuhan in October, 2019. According to an issue of Global Times, a U.S. military cyclist might have brought the disease from Fort Detrick in Maryland (Global Times, 2020). This was the second conspiracy theory that was backed up heavily by Chinese diplomats and the Chinese state media. Conspiracy theories are uncommon in the digital age where availing information is not as difficult as it used to be a few decades back. However, during the pandemic, the source of most conspiracy theories were government officials holding significant position as political and administrative leaders.

On 20 April, 2020, the Washington Post published an article titled ‘As Chinese propaganda on Covid-19 grows, U.S. social media must act’. The article argues that the Chinese state media uses US tech platforms such as Facebook, Twitter and YouTube to shape their discourse on coronavirus outbreak, therefore the US should not allow such platforms to run political advertisements from

media outlets registered under the Foreign Agents Registration (FARA) Act (FARA) (The Washington Post, 2020). While concerns over Chinese propaganda was justifiable, many in the US failed to notice how the Trump administration and its supporters played an important role in inciting xenophobia. Trump’s narrative has received criticisms but at the same time, has gained an overall popularity and many have seemingly accepted his narrative. During a show featuring a panel discussion called “The Five” in Fox News, the anchor Jesse Watters, in what appeared to be an attempt at humour, asked China for a formal apology and explained that the virus originated from Chinese people eating raw bats and snakes as ‘the Chinese communist government cannot feed the people, and they are desperate’ (Fox News, 2020).



The US-China relationship is at the worst
in nearly fifty years.

Meanwhile, in China, media outlets have been working very hard to push the agenda of exhibiting China as a good samaritan and a responsible global actor unlike the US. One prominent example is that of Alex Lo, a columnist for the South China Morning Post (SCMP) who has written several columns criticising the US response to the pandemic. To quote from his column,

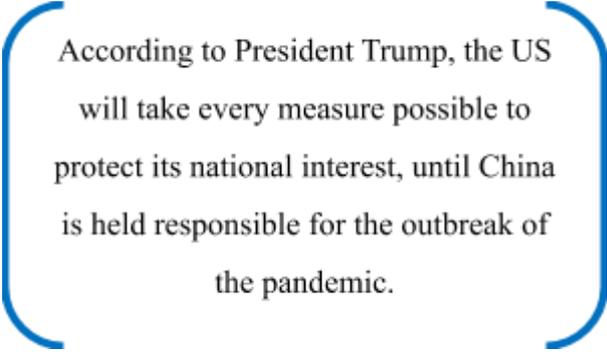
“When the death tolls and cases were rising, Beijing was accused of doing nothing and letting people die. When they started to decline, it was lying. Before Wuhan was put under an unprecedented lockdown, China was trying to “save face” by downplaying the health crisis. When the lockdown was imposed, it was a massive violation of human rights and a power grab” (SCMP, 2020).

In one of the columns published on 12 April 2020, he mentions how Dr Li Wenliang, the young doctor who died of Covid-19 was “neither a whistle blower nor a martyr” (SCMP, 2020).

Criticisms Against China

China’s economic feats over the last couple of years along with massive increase in military power has challenged the US’ global dominance. China’s already complicated relationship with the US is deteriorating during the global pandemic. According to Jacob Stokes, the former National Security Advisor, ‘the US-China relationship is ‘the worst they’ve been in nearly 50 years’ (Dash, 2020). One of the most popular arguments given by the US President is that China has deliberately

let the virus spread in different parts of the world while not letting it spread within China. Trump’s reasoning is based on the fact that the virus caused more damage in the US and Europe but not in Beijing.



According to President Trump, the US will take every measure possible to protect its national interest, until China is held responsible for the outbreak of the pandemic.

The Twitter squabble between the US and Chinese diplomats had become routine when the US decided to take it up a notch by attacking the WHO. In April, 2020 President Trump announced that the US wishes to terminate its relations with the WHO. The primary argument being the failure of the WHO to comply with the US’s request for certain reforms. Trump also mentioned that the Chinese not only failed in their obligations to report the outbreak of the novel coronavirus but also pressured the WHO to mislead the whole world. However, he did not give the details about the reforms he was seeking. (The Print, 2020). In short, the threat to withdraw funding from the WHO in case it did not commit to improvements within 30 days was broadly an effort to retaliate against China (The New York Times, 2020 b).

The US's criticisms against China is mainly focused on accountability, responsibility and transparency. According to President Trump, the US will take every measure possible to protect its national interest, until China is held responsible for the outbreak of the pandemic. According to Trump, China not only wreaked a health havoc around the world but also inflicted severe economic hardships upon many countries. Trump is convinced that the US needs to build its economy independently. The Trump administration has announced a series of economic decisions such as – reshoring of critical supply chains, and protecting America's scientific and technological advances (Economic Times, 2020). Most recently, the new Department of Homeland Security has imposed a new rule prohibiting international students from returning to or remaining in the United States if their colleges adopt an online-only instruction model for the fall on 6 July. This new rule has been widely criticised by students and University administrations as one of the latest reflection of Trump administration's xenophobic and misguided response to the Covid-19 pandemic (Inside Higher Ed, 2020). Since the US is at the forefront reprimanding China, it is only fair to assess the US's response to the pandemic as a global actor.

Criticism Against the US

Inconsistency is one of the primary shortcomings of the US President and it is one of the main reasons why the US is often criticised by the global community. With regards Covid-19, in the beginning of the year, Donald Trump was one of the most vocal global leaders to praise China for containing the virus efficiently. Trump expressed his admiration towards Beijing for taking timely and responsible decisions during the coronavirus outbreak through twitter 15 times (Politico, 2020). These tweets came in around January-February, 2020 when the US and China had recently signed a new trade deal which had briefly paused their economic conflict. On 24 January, Trump even mentioned and applauded China's transparency.

‘China has been working very hard to contain the Coronavirus. The United States greatly appreciates their efforts and transparency. It will all work out well. In particular, on behalf of the American People, I want to thank President Xi!’ (Trump's Twitter Post. 24 January 2020)

In January 2020, Trump shared several tweets commending China's response to the outbreak of Covid-19 and four months later he attacked China on account of transparency. The

unpredictable nature of the Trump administration has led to a declining trust in the

The US has not practised in the past what it is preaching in the present.

US government amongst the members of the global community. Additionally, it has also left the global community wondering if the twitter squabbles and continuous admonishing from the US is actually about the pandemic or a larger geopolitical rivalry between the US and China. China's ability to contain the virus effectively and resume economic activities has not only earned it appreciation but has also sparked a discussion about the effectiveness of non-liberal system. Meanwhile, the US did not show any signs of global leadership or willingness to help the countries severely affected. While the Trump administration threatened to cut WHO funding, China supplied test kits, masks and gloves to over 120 countries (Wire, 2020).

Regarding global responsibility, the US's response when the..Acquired Immunodeficiency Syndrome (AIDS) disease which is caused by Human Immunodeficiency Virus (HIV) was first known is a befitting example to show that the US has not practised in the past what it has been preaching in the present. Under the Ronald Reagan administration, it took the US three years 'from the time the California medicos discovered the new human

immunodeficiency virus and the AIDS disease afflicting the gay community to notify the WHO' (Chakravarthi, 2020).

During these three years, 'AIDS had spread across the country, affecting both homo-and hetero-sexual couples, and across the globe too'. (Chakravarthi, 2020). Even during the current pandemic, the measures taken by the US to contain the spread of Covid-19 was considerably inefficient compared to many other countries in the world. Information about the virus was communicated to the WHO at the end of December 2019 (WHO 2020a) and on 5 January, 2020 WHO published the first disease outbreak news on Covid-19 (WHO, 2020 b).

Holding China entirely responsible for Covid-19 related deaths in the US is slightly misplaced as inefficient decisions by the local and federal government added to the rise in number of Covid-19 positive cases.

The contents included report on the information given by China on the status of patients and risk assessment and advice. There was no action from the US federal government when this information was made public. On 10 January, 2020 WHO published comprehensive guidelines and advice to all the countries "on how to detect, test and manage potential cases, based on what was known about the virus at the time. This guidance was shared with

WHO's regional emergency directors to share with WHO representatives in countries” (WHO, 2020 c).

No active measures were taken by the US Federal government even when the WHO recommended that the healthcare staffs should maintain certain precautions such as droplet and contact precautions when caring for patients. On 21 January, 2020 the US confirmed its first travel related case in Washington, yet it took the federal government ten more days to declare the outbreak of Covid-19 as a public health emergency. In the interim period, seven new cases were confirmed (Statista, 2020).

The WHO declared Covid-19 as a Pandemic on 11 March, even at the end of March, only 32 out of 50 states had locked down in the US. Considering the timeline and measures taken by the Trump administrations in dealing with the coronavirus outbreak in the US, holding the WHO and China entirely responsible for Covid-19 related deaths in the US seem slightly misplaced. Many local and national media outlets have written extensively about the inefficiency and the failure of the Trump administration in dealing with the pandemic (Brookings, 2020).

Impact of Disinformation

Propaganda has been an important instrument of the US and Chinese foreign policy. As

Watkins (1951) describes it, the US government has four instruments for the implementation of its Foreign Policy – Diplomacy, Economic measures, War and Propaganda. The US government propaganda is one of many factors contributing to the formation of American public opinion. Similarly, Under President Xi Jinping, CCP's United Front Work Department (UFWD) has been tasked with using the political propaganda activities to further Chinese strategic, economic, and political interests (Desai, 2020).

In the digital age, propaganda does not influence the public opinion in just one country, it plays an important role in shaping global public opinion. The propaganda war between China and the US has deeply affected the lives of ethnic Chinese settled in the US and overseas. Within a span of two months, several stories of racial discrimination against Asians – Chinese in particular have surfaced. One of the stories that went viral was that of Sammi Yang. In a news article shared by BBC in January, Sammi Yang, a makeup artist from China recalled her experience of having to wait outside a clinic for her doctor's appointment only to later find out that the clinic was not taking in any Chinese patients. (BBC, 2020).

Since the outbreak of the pandemic, news headlines such as 'Yellow Peril', 'Chinese virus panda-monium', 'China kids stay home' have been seen in Australian and French newspapers (BBC, 2020). In Singapore, online

petitions have been signed in huge numbers in favour of banning Chinese Nationals from entering the country (New York Times, 2020 a). According to Prof. Donald Low, an expert in Chinese public policy, ‘In the West, China is seen as far and removed, and the Sinophobia there tends to be borne out of unfamiliarity. But in Asia and South-East Asia it's borne out of too much familiarity’ (Vietnam Global, 2020)..In Japan, the hashtag #ChineseDon’tComeToJapan had been trending on Twitter (The New York Times, 2020, b).

In Hong Kong, South Korea and Vietnam, businesses were seen posting signs saying that mainland Chinese customers are not welcome (TLI,2020). In India, there have been several instances of physical abuse and mental harassment on people from the North-Eastern part of the country owing to their resemblance with East Asian features (India Today, 2020).



A sign on the door of a nail salon in Phu Bar, Quoc, Vietnam. Image Source: CGTN



A sign banning Chinese customers at a bar in Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam. Image Source: Business Insider

Evident from these instances is the power of propaganda to influence people’s attitudes and thought processes. Propaganda war is indeed impactful as common people are easily susceptible to it. The examples of the widely witnessed racist attacks prove that global public opinion can be easily manipulated and that those who control over media have potential control of public opinion (Manzaria and Bruk, 2020).

Conclusion

Challenging US global dominance is not an easy task for Beijing. Despite impressive economic growth, China has still not been able to fully influence the global system. Its values and practices is yet to be accepted by the global community and as a country which is different from most other countries, it is generally viewed with suspicions. China’s way of handling Covid-19 while applauded by many

countries, is also criticized by many others. The US appears at the forefront of these criticisms. While there is little to no doubt about Beijing's initial fault in trying to suppress information about the virus, being blamed for the mistakes and delayed responses of the other governments around the world might be a little unfair. The spike in cases in many countries can be attributed to the wrong decisions taken by the national and local governments.

The nature and number of write-ups published on Covid-19 is mind-boggling and many of these have a biased point of view. Beijing's propaganda endeavours are well-known but US propaganda dispersal in the form of tweets, online columns and TV shows are equally popular.

Shifting away from traditional spheres of competition such as military and economic rivalry, the US-China rivalry is shifting into new and unpredictable areas. The outbreak of Covid-19 seems to have provided yet another domain for competition to both US and China. Conjectures, speculation, suppositions and propaganda form the bulk of information available on Covid-19. The source of most of disinformation that was disseminated in the last four months was either from the US or China. At a time when the world is grappling with a major health crisis, the impact that disinformation has on the day-to-day lives of people is worrisome. Filtering out conspiracy theories and propaganda, the only thing that is

certain about the origin of Covid-19 is that without further investigations, no theory about the origin of Covid-19 holds any ground. Until there is an independent investigation, countries blaming one another is both unreasonable and futile.

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