

CHINA MEDIA BULLETIN

Headlines

ANALYSIS China Central Television: A Long-standing Weapon in Beijing's Arsenal of Repression **P2**

IN THE NEWS

- Harsh punishments meted out for speech-related offenses **P5**
- Surveillance updates: Proliferating cameras, phone inspections at border, facial recognition in schools **P7**
- Censorship updates: Hong Kong news manipulation, liberal think tank shuttered, filmmakers hampered **P8**
- Hong Kong: Journalists face increased attacks amid protests, police clashes, mob violence **P9**
- Beyond China: Hong Kong counterprotests, surveillance exports, Confucius Institute closures **P10**

FEATURED PUSHBACK Major social media firms take down anti-Hong Kong protest disinformation **P12**

WHAT TO WATCH FOR **P13**

TAKE ACTION **P14**

IMAGE OF THE MONTH

Banned “Butcher of Beijing” Front Page

On July 26, Chinese government censors ordered the deletion of all online references to this front page of the *Beijing Youth Daily*, as well as of “malicious comments relating to the death of comrade Li Peng.” The headline notes the death at age 91 of Li, the former premier widely known as the “Butcher of Beijing” for declaring martial law and helping unleash the deadly crackdown on prodemocracy protesters in Beijing on June 4, 1989. The incongruous photo of smiling youth holding flowers, whether intended or not, was apparently interpreted by officials as implying celebration of the unpopular leader’s death.

Credit: [China Digital Times](http://chinadigitaltimes.com)



ANALYSIS

China Central Television: A Long-standing Weapon in Beijing's Arsenal of Repression

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Part of the station's mission is to attack designated enemies of the Communist Party.

Since antigovernment protests began three months ago in Hong Kong, Beijing's state broadcaster, China Central Television (CCTV), has gone to great lengths to demonize the protesters and mislead both Chinese and international audiences about the nature of the movement.

CCTV's flagship news program ran a week's worth of segments in [July](#) that denounced the protests and claimed that they were linked to "external forces." A few weeks later, the broadcaster aired [false reports](#) that a protester had blinded a woman who was actually struck in the eye by a police bean-bag round. More recently, the station's international arm released videos and graphics on YouTube and Facebook that likened protesters to [Islamist militants](#) and claimed that they are backed by US [spy agencies](#). And on September 18, CCTV news [posted a video on the Sina Weibo](#) microblogging platform that urged its [89 million followers](#) to identify, investigate, and publish online the personal information of Hong Kong protesters and journalists, exposing them to real-world harassment.

This latest use of CCTV to target the political enemies of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) is neither isolated nor new. As the 70th anniversary of Communist Party rule in China approaches on October 1, it is worth reexamining CCTV's role not only in helping to prop up party legitimacy and promote the reputation of its leaders, but also in doing the party's "dirty work" by defaming and inciting hatred against perceived foes.

The broadcaster has achieved a truly global reach, meaning its content has the potential to shape the perceptions of hundreds of millions of people within and beyond China's borders. The fact that this content is heavily distorted to suit the CCP's political agenda poses a growing challenge for news consumers, regulators, journalists, advertisers, and others around the world.

A state broadcaster like no other

CCTV was founded [61 years ago](#), at a time when few Chinese citizens owned a television set. Today, it reaches nearly every household in China, runs over 40 channels, and produces more than 300,000 hours of programming a year. Alongside news, there are channels dedicated to sports, film, Chinese opera, and [rural affairs](#). As the only authorized national broadcaster, the station retains a unique and privileged position in the domestic media market. Its flagship evening news program, *Xinwen Lianbo*, airs for 30 minutes at 7 p.m. Local and provincial stations are required to carry the program as well, ensuring a regular viewership in the hundreds of millions in addition to a large social media following.

Not surprisingly, CCTV maintains close ties to the party's political and media-control hierarchy. The broadcaster's current president, [Shen Haixiong](#), is not only a CCP member but also an alternate member of the Central Committee. He had previously served as head of the propaganda department in Guangdong Province.

CCTV's news program provides an authoritative expression of official viewpoints, but its repertoire also includes various "investigative" programs that seem to cater to the public interest, even carrying occasional exposés of official wrongdoing. Among the most notable of these shows is *Jiaodian Fangtan* (*Focus Talk*). [Recent episodes](#) have offered "feel good" stories on party cadres leading rural villages, the technological prowess of companies in different provinces, and the importance of a new land-management law.

Mobilizing against the party's foes

While day-to-day coverage may be focused on promoting government policies, praising the party leadership, or demonstrating that corrupt officials are being brought to justice, the same programs have been activated time and again to serve as the party's attack dogs when a particular political threat emerges, defaming the designated targets and whitewashing horrific human rights abuses against them.

One of the first and starkest examples of these televised campaigns coincided with the 1999 launch of the CCP's violent crackdown on the [Falun Gong](#) meditation and spiritual practice. Other efforts have followed at regular intervals, including a 2009 documentary series about the [Dalai Lama](#), the airing of [forced confessions](#) as part of a crackdown on human rights lawyers that began in 2015, attempts to justify the mass detention of Muslims in Xinjiang since 2017, the disinformation about this summer's antigovernment protests in Hong Kong, and just this month, ominous [warnings](#) that Taiwanese spies are using academic exchanges to recruit Chinese students.

Focus Talk has also carried highly problematic reports at key moments in the CCP's political crackdowns. The show aired 28 episodes defaming and inciting hatred against practitioners of Falun Gong within a 32 day period in 1999. This was followed by [deceptive reporting](#) claiming a group of people who self-immolated on Tiananmen Square in 2001 were adherents of the banned group. In 2006, a [Canadian regulatory commission](#) acknowledged that such coverage was "clearly abusive" and "could incite violence" against those who practice Falun Gong in China and abroad.

More recently, it was an [October 2018 episode](#) of the program that offered the first acknowledgment in Chinese state media of the existence of detention centers in Xinjiang, framing them as "vocational centers" that would boost employment and curb extremism rather than as heavily guarded facilities where ordinary Muslims are being confined en masse for political indoctrination and forced labor. Subsequent [episodes](#) have continued to parrot the official party line that the centers "saved people who hold terrorist and extremist intentions" in Xinjiang, despite credible reports of forced disappearances, torture, and deaths in custody affecting people with no connection to violence.

To produce such content, CCTV journalists are given exclusive access to relevant locations, interviewees, and officials. But they also apparently accept the government's stage-management, fabrications, and distortions, without criticism or independent verification. In some cases, CCTV reporters have been complicit in deceiving interviewees or helping police to manipulate them.

This is especially clear with respect to televised confessions. [An April 2018](#) investigation by Safeguard Defenders into 45 such confessions by detained journalists, bloggers, lawyers, activists, and others between 2013 and 2018 found that 90 percent had been aired on CCTV. In many instances, there was concrete evidence that the station's staff played a knowingly collaborative role in producing and editing segments that had been filmed in coercive or deceptive circumstances.

Global resonance

This fraudulent and demonizing coverage has a real-world impact. It poisons the minds of Chinese viewers against innocent fellow citizens, and prepares the ground for [further state abuses](#). Victims are deprived of potential support from both domestic—and in some cases international—audiences. One prominent Falun Gong torture survivor recalled in an interview how after the airing of the Focus Talk special about the supposed self-immolation in 2001, her own brother became afraid of her. Popular remarks on Chinese social media following the 2018 episode on Xinjiang included comments like “we have to help a large number of Muslims to quit their Islam addiction,” and that “it's quite a frightening disease.” The propaganda blitzes are often followed by an escalation in police violence against the targeted group and their impact on public perceptions can last for years.

But the effects of CCTV's programming and propaganda tactics also reach far beyond China's borders. Among the Chinese diaspora, the state broadcaster is a dominant source of news and entertainment, and its content encourages discrimination and even assaults against CCP critics and persecuted minorities by fellow overseas Chinese. In recent weeks, for example, mainland students and others have attempted to silence and vandalize shows of support for Hong Kong protesters in places like Canada, Australia, and New Zealand.

The broadcaster's international arm, China Global Television Network (CGTN), has expanded its footprint and produced programming in multiple languages to reach non-Chinese viewers around the world. While it initially aims to build local audiences with attractive and innocuous content, it can be mobilized at key political moments to attack CCP opponents.

For instance, CGTN's Facebook page now boasts over 85 million followers spread around the globe, and its ads and posts have tended to portray the Chinese government and leaders in a positive light and emphasize attractive national themes like pandas, Chinese cuisine, or tourism opportunities in particular provinces. But interspersed with the relatively benign content are a series of posts and ads that liken Hong Kong protesters to [terrorists](#) or repeat proven fabrications like a [report](#) claiming that

protesters carrying [toy weapons](#) were armed with a US-made grenade launcher.

How to respond

Given CCTV's close relationship with the Chinese state, its political campaigns, and its ongoing severe human rights violations, viewers in China and elsewhere would be wise to receive the broadcaster's coverage—particularly of politically sensitive topics—with a healthy dose of skepticism, and to seek out more independent sources of information.

For their part, foreign news media should be wary of accepting CCTV coverage at face value and should conduct their own investigations into problematic content aired by the station, as some have done with regard to the recent reporting on Hong Kong. Journalists should carefully consider the ethical implications of working with or for the outlet, no matter what remuneration it might offer.

Although it is owned and subsidized by the Chinese state, CCTV also earns billions of dollars in private advertising revenue. Multinational corporations that currently pay for advertisements on CCTV—particularly its news programs—should reconsider this business decision and look to the many other avenues for reaching Chinese consumers.

Foreign governments and regulators should vigorously monitor the content being aired in their countries by CCTV in Chinese and CGTN in local languages. They should be ready to enforce any broadcasting regulations that might be violated, as [British regulator Ofcom](#) is now contemplating with regards to Hong Kong coverage and forced confessions. Foreign-agent registration requirements should be applied to CCTV in Chinese, as they already are to CGTN and other Chinese state media services in the United States, and consideration should be given to imposing sanctions on key executives responsible for televised confessions, as European officials have done in the case of Iran's Press TV.

Despite the broad diversity of CCTV's content and the arguably small percentage that rises to the level of abusive or demonizing propaganda, all audiences must remember that it is not a "normal" television station. It has a consistent record of blatantly and egregiously violating journalistic standards and encouraging or justifying hatred and violence against innocent people. CCTV is an essential component of the CCP's brutal authoritarian regime and should be treated as such.

IN THE NEWS

Harsh punishments meted out for speech-related offenses

While the Chinese government has developed one of the world's most technologically sophisticated systems for information control, authorities continue to use low-tech tactics to punish and deter critical reporting and commentary. The following are a selection of such cases from the past few months:

- Long prison sentences:** Huang Qi, the founder of the human rights website 64 Tianwang, was [sentenced to 12 years in prison](#) on July 29 for “intentionally leaking state secrets.” In late June, authorities sentenced Liu Pengfei, the moderator of a popular WeChat account that provided Chinese readers with access to foreign news, to [two years’ imprisonment](#). Liu’s arrest came after [warnings issued by state media in May](#) that WeChat administrators could be held responsible for discussions in their groups. Mongolian historian Lhamjab A. Borjgin was [sentenced on July 3 to one year in prison](#) with a two-year reprieve for “national separatism” and “illegal business [activities]” related to dissemination of his book, *China’s Cultural Revolution*.
- Deaths in custody and execution fears:** Chinese Human Rights Defenders reported on [September 23](#) that police had alerted relatives of activist Wang Meiyu that he had died in custody in Hunan. Wang was detained in July after holding a [placard in public](#) calling for Xi Jinping’s resignation and the conduct of national elections. In a separate case, Meng Hong, an elderly Falun Gong practitioner sentenced to prison in 2013 for handing out flyers, reportedly [died on July 30 while in custody, according to her daughter living in the United States](#). In Xinjiang, scholar and former president of Xinjiang University Tashpolat Teyip [may be “imminently” executed](#), according to Radio Free Asia. Teyip’s brother has not been able to contact him since his disappearance in 2017 en route to a conference in Germany.
- Trumped-up espionage charges:** [Yang Hengjun](#), an Australian writer detained by Chinese authorities in January while visiting Guangzhou, was formally charged with espionage on August 23. [Australian prime minister Scott Morrison](#) has rejected the charges against Yang, who had been detained before [in March 2011](#), but was released due to international pressure. Yang is not the only foreign national facing such charges: Canadians Michael Spavor, a businessman, and Michael Kovrig, a former Canadian diplomat who had worked for the International Crisis Group, have been detained since December 2018 in apparent reprisal for Canada’s arrest of Huawei executive Meng Wanzhou. They were [formally charged with national security crimes this May](#).
- Long-term incommunicado detention:** Uighurs continued to be held in long-term detention for comments made online, other forms of expression, or having outspoken relatives living abroad. Among those in custody are [Buzainafu Abudourexiti](#), a student detained in 2017 after returning from studies in Egypt, and thirty relatives of prominent activist Rebiya Kadeers. Beyond Xinjiang, grassroots activist [Chen Jiafeng has been detained since March](#) due to an online article she wrote regarding the death of activist Cao Shunli. Labor activists [Wei Zhili and Ke Chengbing have also been detained since March](#), while a third labor activist, Yang Zhengjun, [has been detained since January](#). None of these individuals have been permitted to contact lawyers or their families.
- Detentions in connection with Hong Kong prodemocracy protests:** A 25-year-old Shenzhen resident who uses the pseudonym “Freedom Lu” was [held by authorities for ten days in August](#) on charges of “picking quarrels,” after he posted essays online urging mainlanders to rethink their attitudes about events in Hong Kong. In

Chongqing, a local resident was [placed under police surveillance in early August](#) for expressing support online for the protests.

- **Other arrests linked to free-speech offenses:** A Tibetan man in Sichuan was [detained for 10 days in July](#) for sharing a photograph of the Dalai Lama on WeChat. Two men were [detained on June 13](#) for spreading rumors online concerning Chinese tech company Huawei. And Chinese artist Zhao Bang was [arrested in August for designing an emoji-laden t-shirt](#) that obliquely referenced the Tiananmen Square massacre. Zhang Jialong, a former journalist, was [detained on August 13](#) for “picking quarrels and provoking troubles.” Zhang was known for his 2014 in-person appeal to US Secretary of State John Kerry for the US to pressure China over its internet censorship regime, but had been inactive since losing his job after the meeting.
- **Visa denied:** The *Wall Street Journal*’s Chun Han Wong was [denied press credentials by the Chinese government in late August](#). The Singaporean journalist’s expulsion from China is believed to come in retaliation for his July 30 report on President Xi Jinping’s cousin Ming Chai, a naturalized Australian citizen suspected of money laundering.

Surveillance updates: Proliferating cameras, phone inspections at border, facial recognition in schools

- **Eight of the top ten most-surveilled cities in the world are in China:** Researchers with the British proconsumer website Comparitech found that China has [more surveillance cameras per capita](#) than any other country. Chongqing was ranked as the world’s most-surveilled city, with 2.6 million cameras—or roughly 168.03 cameras per 1,000 people. There are believed to be more than 200 million surveillance cameras currently in use in China, with that number expected to rise to 626 million or higher by 2022.
- **New spyware and phone inspections at the border:** Several reports emerged over the summer of visitors to China having their phones inspected at the border, apparently in connection with the unfolding crises in Xinjiang and Hong Kong. A joint investigation by the *New York Times*; *Süddeutsche Zeitung* and NDR, both of Germany; *the Guardian*; and the online magazine Motherboard published in July found that Chinese authorities have [compelled people entering Xinjiang from Central Asia by land to install a surveillance app on their phone](#). Called Fengcai, the app can collect text messages and check the phone’s files against a list of more than 73,000 sensitive items, which includes both books on Islamic terrorism and images of the Dalai Lama. Meanwhile, Hong Kong residents crossing into mainland China have been compelled to unlock their phones and permit authorities to search for material related to the ongoing protests, [according to the South China Morning Post](#). During these inspections, which occurred in July and August at the land crossing between Hong Kong and Shenzhen, some individuals were also asked whether or not they had participated in the protests.

- **Facial-recognition technology in schools prompts increasing concern:** An August report on Sohu News detailed [the use of facial recognition cameras at a primary school](#) that are capable of assessing students' posture and facial expressions, among other things. The expansion of facial-recognition in schools has prompted mounting domestic concern in recent months, and there are some signs of a government response. Officials at the China Pharmaceutical University in Nanjing recently announced they will [curb the practice](#), while an official with the Ministry of Education conceded that officials must ["be very careful when it comes to students' personal information,"](#) adding that the government planned to regulate the use of facial recognition technology in classrooms.
- **Facial-recognition systems increasingly installed at public buildings:** A report by Bitter Winter, an online magazine monitoring religious freedom in China, points [to the increasing use of surveillance systems in public buildings](#). The magazine reported in September that facial recognition equipment had been installed by a local public security bureau at a residential compound in Jiangxi, as well as at 13 public housing complexes in Beijing. It is believed these systems could be used to surveil political dissidents and practitioners meeting at house churches.

Censorship updates: Hong Kong news manipulation, liberal think tank shuttered, filmmakers hampered

- **Censors delete, manipulate news on Hong Kong:** Online content related to the Hong Kong protests that falls outside official government narratives continues to be significantly censored within China, while pro-regime propaganda is heavily promoted. Leaked instructions dated June 16 and published by [China Digital Times](#) order websites to "[f]ind and delete video content related to Hong Kong anti-extradition protests," and to "delete any harmful comments" that reference several songs [netizens](#) have embraced as a way to discreetly express support for the protesters. A more recent set of [instructions](#), dated September 5, highlights the dilemma facing Beijing's content regulators following the official withdrawal of the extradition law amendments. The directives warn "all websites and new media" to "not re-publish, do not follow up, do not report, and strictly dispose of foreign information posted to social platforms" regarding the withdrawal. The instructions apparently came in response to online comments by Chinese netizens [expressing confusion](#) at the concession, which followed weeks of condemnation of the protests by state media. The leaked directive also ordered online media platforms to "[c]lose relevant comment sections, and strictly handle accounts who attack the government in the name of patriotism."
- **Liberal Beijing-based institute announces closure:** In late August, the Beijing-based Unirule Institute of Economics [announced its closure](#) after years of harassment by the authorities. The shuttering of Unirule, which over the last two years saw its social media accounts deleted and was evicted from its offices, is only the latest development reflecting authorities' growing intolerance of free academic debate and critical discussion of economic policy.

- **Censors target war film, Taiwanese film festival:** Chinese censors have continued to target mainland filmmakers. The release of the eagerly awaited war epic *The Eight Hundred* [was cancelled in late June](#), according to a brief statement on the producer's Sina Weibo account. The cancellation, announced just days before the film's planned premiere, is thought to be related to its positive depiction of Nationalist soldiers who fought during the 1937 Battle of Shanghai prior to their defeat in 1949 to the Communists in China's civil war. Separately, against a backdrop of rising tensions between China and Taiwan, the China Film Administration announced on August 6 that it would [prevent mainland filmmakers from participating](#) in Taiwan's prestigious Golden Horse Film Festival in November. Chinese documentary filmmaker Zhu Yu, who had previously expressed her intention to defy the ban, [withdrew from the festival](#) after she became the target of a cyberbullying campaign.
- **Content-recommendation algorithms face restrictive regulations:** Draft [regulations](#) issued by the Cyberspace Administration of China on September 10 state that social media platforms, websites, and apps using algorithms to recommend content to users must ensure recommended material is in line with "mainstream values" and state ideology. The regulations come on the heels of the August 31 publication by the CCP Central Committee of "[Regulations on the Chinese Communist Party's Propaganda Work](#)," which stipulates the [seven main responsibilities](#) of Party committees regarding propaganda work, as well as sixteen discrete responsibilities for propaganda departments operating at all levels.

HONG KONG

Journalists face increased attacks amid protests, police clashes, mob violence

As prodemocracy protests in Hong Kong continue into the early fall, journalists and photographers in Hong Kong have increasingly become targets of violence by police officers, pro-Beijing mobs, and, on occasion, protesters themselves.

Since early July, the Hong Kong Journalists Association (HKJA) has issued more than a dozen statements condemning attacks on media workers and urging all actors to allow journalists to work freely, and to take notice of PRESS helmets and vests. "Violent individuals and gangs are becoming more malicious in targeting and intimidating journalists," the HKJA said in [a September 16 statement](#), and repeated calls for police to acknowledge persistent abuses against journalists and "ensure fair law enforcement."

Recent attacks on the media documented by HKJA include:

- **July 8:** Police [assaulted, and obstructed the work of](#) journalists trying to covering police clearance operations on Nathan Road, in Mong Kok.
- **July 14:** A reporter and a photographer from TVB News were assaulted by protesters during demonstrations in Shatin. The same day, a journalist from Commercial Hong Kong Radio was pepper sprayed by a police officer as he was covering a scuf-

fle between police and protesters.

- **July 21:** Two journalists were beaten with rods at the Yuen Long MTR station by a gang of pro-Beijing men wearing white t-shirts, who also destroyed their camera. One of the journalists was subsequently hospitalized for their injuries. The men had also attacked a number of protesters and bystanders at the station.
- **July 30:** A number of [attacks against journalists](#) took place during protests at the Kwai Chung Police Station. Among them: police officers rushed at a photojournalist and deliberately struck him with a riot shield; a reporter was beaten by police while she was attempting to leave the scene of the demonstration; and a police officer pointed a shotgun at reporters covering the events.
- **August 5:** A TVB News vehicle was destroyed by protesters during demonstrations near the Wong Tai Sin Centre.
- **August 11:** Several journalists were assaulted amid an unruly gathering in North Point, including a Ming Pao journalist who was punched; a Stand News journalist who was threatened with a stick; and a journalist with the public broadcaster Radio Television Hong Kong (RTHK) who was assaulted by a crowd. Police made no arrests in any of these incidents.
- **August 14:** During demonstrations at the Hong Kong International Airport, a reporter from the Hong Kong China News Agency was forced by protesters to delete pictures, while protesters tied up a reporter from the *Global Times*, a nationalist Chinese state-owned paper.
- **August 31:** Police expelled reporters from the Prince Edward MTR station without explanation on the same evening they entered, trained and assaulted commuters deemed linked to protests. That [same evening](#), at Victoria Park, a group of ten reporters was encircled by police and temporarily prevented from leaving.
- **September 2:** Police deployed tear gas and pepper spray against journalists at close range as they were covering [demonstrations outside of the Mongkok Police](#) station. A journalist from Now TV was pushed to the ground by police and was later treated for injuries to his hand at a local hospital.
- **September 15:** Several apparently pro-Beijing men attacked journalists and damaged their cameras during a police clearance operations on Hong Kong Island, but police made no arrests.
- **September 17:** A Hong Kong Baptist University journalism student and reporter for Broadcast News Network was arrested while reporting on protests on Hong Kong Island, and police blocked other reporters from filming the arrest.

BEYOND CHINA

Hong Kong counterprotests, surveillance exports, Confucius Institute closures

- **Hong Kong protests overseas met with counterprotests, stifling of speech:** Clashes between supporters and opponents of the Hong Kong democracy movement [at Australian and New Zealand university campuses](#) have featured violent rhetoric by pro-Beijing students and an attack against at least one journalist. Well-organized groups of overseas Chinese students have responded to the establishment of so-

called Lennon Walls covered in post-it notes calling for freedom by [ripping down the expressions of support](#) and bullying participating students. And while overseas rallies in support of the Hong Kong protests continue to elicit participation from both Hong Kongers and others, Chinese diplomats and consular officials have [offered support for counterprotests](#)—and, correspondingly, tacit approval of the violent behavior that has taken place at some of them.

- **New research details China’s internet control, surveillance exports to over 100 countries:** A September report by the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace [identified China as “a major driver of AI surveillance worldwide.”](#) Chinese companies have sold AI technology to 63 countries, and are on the cutting edge of [facial recognition technology](#), according to the study. Moreover, Chinese companies, along with their Russian counterparts, have provided internet control tools or training to over 100 countries, according to a separate report [by the Open Technology Fund](#), also released in September.
- **Huawei helped African governments spy on opponents:** The *Wall Street Journal* reported in August that employees of Chinese tech company Huawei had helped [Ugandan and Zambian authorities intercept](#) the encrypted communications of their political opponents, and had tracked the locations of some subjects using mobile phone data. Huawei, a primary supplier of internet network and surveillance equipment in sub-Saharan Africa, has also provided the Ugandan government with surveillance cameras equipped with facial recognition software, [raising fears of privacy campaigners](#).
- **Chinese police and proxies intimidate, threaten Uighur Americans:** Uighurs living in the United States and Canada continue to face a campaign of intimidation by Chinese authorities, [according to an August report by the Uyghur Human Rights Project](#). Individuals who have spoken out against the Chinese government reported receiving WeChat messages or phone calls in which individuals identifying as Chinese police officers threatened their family members in Xinjiang with imprisonment if they did not end their activism. Others have reported efforts to recruit them as informants for the Chinese government. In one case [reported in May by Newsweek](#), Chinese authorities released a woman from a reeducation camp and compelled her to phone her son overseas to persuade him to refrain from criticizing the Chinese government; she was then returned to the camp days later.
- **Confucius Institutes close in the United States, face probe in Australia:** Confucius Institutes are under renewed scrutiny in the US and Australia, amid growing concerns over Chinese government interference in Western academic institutions. Under a US military spending bill, US universities that host a Confucius Institute [may not receive Defense Department funding](#) for Chinese language training. More than a dozen US universities [have now closed their Confucius Institutes](#) in order to maintain Pentagon funding, the most recent being [Miami Dade College on September 5](#). In Australia, the government of New South Wales [announced in August](#) that it had ended a partnership with Hanban, the Chinese government agency that oversees Confucius Institutes, to provide Chinese language programs in 13 public schools.

That announcement came in the wake of [a July 25 report by the *Sydney Morning Herald*](#) that found that Confucius Institutes in Australian universities had signed agreements granting the Chinese government decision-making authority over teaching at the facilities. There are currently 548 Confucius Institutes and 1,193 primary and secondary school-based Confucius classrooms in operation worldwide.

FEATURED PUSHBACK

Major social media firms take down anti-Hong Kong protest disinformation

Since mid-August, at least three major US-based social media platforms—Twitter, Facebook, and YouTube—have publicly announced the discovery and removal of large networks of accounts that were actively spreading disinformation aimed at demonizing or otherwise undermining the reputation of prodemocracy protests that have taken place in Hong Kong since June. All three are blocked in mainland China.

Twitter was the first company to go public, announcing in an [August 19 blog post](#) that it had suspended 936 accounts from within China that were “deliberately and specifically attempting to sow political discord in Hong Kong, including undermining the

legitimacy and political position of the protest movement on the ground.” It added that an additional 200,000 new accounts created after the initial closures were also shuttered. The same day, [Facebook](#) announced that after being tipped off by Twitter to the campaign, it too had removed seven Pages, three Groups, and five Facebook accounts involved in “coordinated inauthentic behavior...focused on Hong Kong.” Example posts Facebook shared after the removals compared Hong Kong protesters to cockroaches and Islamic State militants. Then, on August 23, Google revealed that its video-sharing platform [YouTube](#) had closed a network of 210 channels that had “behaved in a coordinated manner while uploading videos related to the ongoing protests in Hong Kong”.

Both Twitter and Facebook explicitly said they had found evidence of this being a coordinated Chinese state-backed operation, while Google refrained from placing the blame



at the feet of the Chinese government. Twitter also made public all of the account names and tweets shared from the initially suspended accounts in an effort to assist researchers studying Chinese and other political manipulation activities on the platform. On [September 20](#), Twitter published datasets from an additional 4,301 accounts most active in the August operation. It separately announced that all state-owned news outlets globally would henceforth be barred from using its [advertising services](#).

The companies' moves to expose these covert disinformation campaigns were welcomed by free expression advocates. Whether they will dampen Chinese state and other actors' efforts to spread disinformation remains to be seen.

WHAT TO WATCH FOR

- **PRC anniversary tightening:** As with other politically sensitive anniversaries this year, watch for increased information controls and pro-Beijing propaganda surrounding October 1—the 70th anniversary of Communist Party rule in China—including tightened internet controls, heightened real-world surveillance in Beijing, and “forced vacations” for dissidents and activists to remote parts of China.
- **Hong Kong escalation:** As prodemocracy protests and clashes with police continue, watch for further arrests, media obstructions, and police violence surrounding the October 1 anniversary and beyond, as the authorities seek to end the movement and avoid accountability for police brutality. Also watch for reprisals for joining protests or expressing support for the movement among Hong Kong businesses and their employees, as has occurred in recent weeks at airline [Cathay Pacific](#).
- **Impact of US bans on Chinese tech:** As bans on the use of products by Chinese companies like surveillance supplier [Hikvision](#) and on partnerships with tech giant [Huawei](#) take effect, watch for the impact of their implementation on the companies' operations in China and elsewhere, and whether other Chinese firms change their business plans to avoid similar sanctions.

TAKE ACTION

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- **Support a prisoner:** Learn how to take action to help journalists and free expression activists, including those featured in passed issues of the *China Media Bulletin*, [here](#).
- **Visit the *China Media Bulletin Resources* section:** Learn more about how policy-makers, media outlets, educators and donors can help advance free expression in China and beyond via a [new resource section](#) on the Freedom House website.

For more information

- For archives, go to: www.freedomhouse.org/China-media
- For additional information on human rights and free expression in China, see: *Freedom in the World 2018*, *Freedom of the Press 2017*, *Freedom on the Net 2018*, and *The Battle for China's Spirit: Religious Revival, Repression, and Resistance under Xi Jinping*



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