

Inoculating Society against Authoritarian Influence in the Digital Age

Fortifying the Barracks against Authoritarian Cognitive Warfare

COL HSU MIN-CHENG, TAIWAN ARMY

Abstract

As authoritarian regimes increasingly employ sophisticated information warfare tactics, democratic societies face urgent challenges in countering cognitive influence operations. This article examines how entities like the Chinese Communist Party strategically disseminate misleading narratives through social media platforms to sway public opinion, erode trust in democratic institutions, and advance the People's Republic of China's geopolitical agendas. Leveraging techniques such as coordinated inauthentic behavior, algorithmic manipulation, and emerging technologies like deepfakes, these operations exacerbate societal divisions and undermine national resilience. Drawing insights from Taiwan's proactive countermeasures, the article explores whole-of-society approaches to enhancing media literacy, fostering societal resistance, and "vaccinating" the public against hostile influence campaigns. By strengthening cognitive defenses and fortifying the information environment, democratic nations can safeguard their values, uphold sovereignty, and maintain strategic advantages over revisionist authoritarian powers in an era of relentless information confrontation.

While the world's attention is drawn to the Israel– Hamas conflict and its repercussions on the Middle East and global dynamics, another arena of contention between Israel and Hamas emerges in the cyber and information domains, warranting acknowledgment. While Israel pursues conventional military strategies and Hamas employs insurgent tactics as a non-state entity, both sides actively engage in information warfare to provide a rationale for their actions and garner international support. This contest in the cyber and cognitive spheres by both factions underscores the significance of information warfare in contemporary conflicts.

Yet, a different narrative is gaining traction on social media, exerting a considerable influence, particularly within the global Chinese community. This narrative posits that the root cause of the Israel– Hamas conflict lies in the longstanding support provided by the United States to Israel, a significant non-NATO ally.

In fact, the United States recognizes Israel as one of its 18 Major non-NATO allies. In 2014, this recognition was further reinforced through the passage of H.R.938, the United States-Israel Strategic Partnership Act, which increased additional support to Israel in defense, energy, and the enhancement of commercial and academic cooperation. Therefore, the US support for Israel is based on the legal recognition of Israel as a strategic partner in the Middle East.

The Narrative of Israel– Hamas Conflict on Douyin (抖音)

“战旗红” (Zhan-Chi-Hon) operates as an active creator account on Douyin, the Chinese equivalent of TikTok, boasting 475,000 followers. Furthermore, on the widely accessed Chinese media platform “今日头条” (Jin-Rih-Toutiao), it has amassed 473,000 followers and 3.93 million likes. However, Zhan-Chi-Hon is not authentic; it masquerades as a legitimate entity while disseminating disinformation to bolster Chinese Communist Party (CCP) ideology and propaganda.



Figure 1. Screenshot of Zhan-Chi-Hon creator account on Douyin

Despite claiming to be an exceptional creator specializing in Chinese military affairs, as of 15 December 2023, Zhan-Chi-Hon has uploaded 388 short videos addressing international military matters such as the Israel– Hamas conflict, the

Russian invasion of Ukraine, and the South China Sea dispute. However, content pertaining to the Chinese military and its analysis remains relatively scant.



Figure 2. Screenshot of Zhan-Chi-Hon creator account on Jin-Rih-Toutiao platform

According to the information on the Chinese recruitment website “Boss 直聘”(Boss Zhipin), the parent company of Zhan-Chi-Hon is Yunnan 战旗 (Zhan-Chi) Network Technology Co., Ltd. The founder and general manager of Zhan-Chi Network Technology is “欧阳治民”(Oyan-Zhimin). Based on the information disclosed on the website, Oyan-Zhimin is a graduate of the People’s Liberation Army (PLA) Kunming Army Academy who retired as a lieutenant colonel in the PLA. During his service, he worked as an editor at the 战旗报 (Zhan-Chi-Bao) military newspaper in the Chengdu Military Region. Following his retirement in 2020, Oyan-Zhimin established Zhan-Chi-Hon in China with the aim of actively promoting patriotism, heroism, and disseminating “positive red energy” on internet.



Figure 3. Screenshot of information about Zhan-Chi Network Technology on Boss Zhipin website. According to information disclosed (as showed in the call-out box), The Zhan-Chi company adheres to the character of Zhan-Chi-Bao newspaper and builds online media such as 兵说 (Bing-Shao) and Zhan-Chi-Hon to actively promote patriotism, heroism and spread “positive red energy”, which is credited by government authorities and loved by the majority of netizens. For more information, visit <https://www.zhipin.com/>.

The majority of the 388 videos published by Zhan-Chi-Hon convey a strongly biased and anti-American perspective. Some of the content seeks to mislead viewers, such as the portrayal of the November 2023 agreement between Israel and Hamas to temporarily cease fire and exchange prisoners. Zhan-Chi-Hon distorts these mutual concessions, depicting Israel as succumbing to pressure from the international community and making decisions due to setbacks in military operations, thereby endorsing Hamas and perpetuating false propaganda.

Numerous creators on Douyin, like Zhan-Chi-Hon, are producing videos attributing the Israel–Hamas conflict primarily to the long-standing support of the United States for Israel. These Chinese-language videos have not only inundated the Internet within Communist China but also spread across TikTok and various other social media platforms. The influence of these biased videos extends to

Chinese-speaking communities worldwide, shaping perceptions and even reaching other ethnic groups within the United States.



欧阳治民

总经理

公司创始人、法人代表欧阳治民，毕业于昆明陆军学院，服役20年，2020年退役，曾任成都军区战旗报社编辑、宣传处干事、师宣传科长等职，中校军衔，立二等功两次，三等功五次。参加汶川抗震救灾、中缅边境森林救火、四川芦山抗震救灾、中印陆军联训、国际侦察兵比武、中美人道主义救援演练等20余项重大军事活动，参与“时代楷模”王锐、排雷英雄战士杜富国等重大典型宣传，发表作品2200余件计120余万字，22件获奖，参与编写《红色大讲堂》等5部书籍，3件作品获全国报纸副刊奖，2件获解放军新闻奖等。

Figure 4. Screenshot of information about Oyan-Zhimin on Boss Zhipin website. According to information disclosed, in addition to his service in the PLA, Oyan-Zhimin is skilled in news reporting and propaganda work. He has received several awards from the PLA for his contributions.

Biased Narratives on Social Media Are Shaping the Perception of the Younger Generation

In November 2023, US Senator Josh Hawley (R-MO) penned a letter to US Treasury Secretary and Chairwoman of the Committee on Foreign Investment Janet Yellen expressing concerns about TikTok's ability to influence the perceptions of the younger generation in the United States.

Senator Hawley also referenced a poll indicating that 51 percent of Americans aged 18 to 24 believe that Hamas' targeting of civilians was justified. Analysts concluded that a significant portion of young Internet users obtain information through TikTok, with the platform's abundance of anti-Israel content being a major factor in shaping young Americans' beliefs regarding the justification of Hamas' murdering of civilians.¹

In this case, several issues merit consideration. Typically, Internet users primarily serve as commentators and sharers of information, rather than creators of short videos and memes. The rationale is simple: producing informational content requires time and resources, and most regular Internet users do not invest in content creation without direct benefits.

So, who are the creators willing to invest time and resources, specifically targeting the Chinese-speaking audience? These creators argue that the long-standing support of the United States for Israel is the root cause of the Israel–Hamas conflict and endeavor to enlist civilians as their proxies. Their messages are explicit and aimed at sowing divisions among the American public. The critical question arises: who bears responsibility for disseminating such contentious and misleading information to influence or weaken US policies toward its allies and partners?

It Is Not the Only Case

The political landscape in Israel and its neighboring regions is intricately complex, influenced by historical legacies that give rise to diverse perspectives, interpretations, and occasionally biased viewpoints. However, when authoritarian states purposefully engage in information warfare to sway the political landscape or international environment, manipulate diplomatic channels, influence decision-making processes, shape public opinion in democratic nations, and even vilify opponents to stoke internal nationalism, it underscores a fundamental departure from the principles of freedom of thought and speech. So, how exactly do authoritarian states and terrorist organizations wage information warfare?

Perhaps we can glean insights from the dissemination of controversial and misleading information by the CCP concerning Taiwan during the Russian invasion of Ukraine. Since the start of the Russian invasion of Ukraine, global attention has been focused on understanding the motives behind Russia's invasion, recognizing Ukraine's resilience, and evaluating the war's ramifications for sectors such as agriculture, energy, and geopolitics.

¹ Josh Hawley, "Hawley Renews Effort to Ban TikTok Following Rise in Pro-Hamas Content," US Senate website, 7 November 2023, <https://www.hawley.senate.gov/>.

In Taiwan, while these aspects are undoubtedly subjects of discourse, there is an additional narrative spreading across the internet. The Taiwan Information Environment Research Center (IORG) conducted a study titled “Manipulated warfare: Ukraine bad, US bad, Russia good, abandon Taiwan” in 2022.² The research involved the collection and analysis of 276,000 Chinese online messages, posts, and news reports from November 2021 to February 2022, examining various narrative types and dissemination patterns. The study uncovered instances of information manipulation and political propaganda targeting the United States and Taiwan, with themes such as “The U.S. using Taiwan as a pawn” and “Today Ukraine, Tomorrow Taiwan.”

Furthermore, among the contentious messages circulating online is the assertion that if China were to initiate a conflict with Taiwan, the United States would unquestionably abandon Taiwan, commonly referred to as the “abandon Taiwan narrative.” Another narrative insinuates that the United States is utilizing Ukraine to undermine Russia via a proxy war.

Throughout the Russian invasion of Ukraine, narratives aimed at sowing discord in Taiwan–US relations and sentiments permeated Taiwan’s online sphere. These messages were amplified through political pundits, Internet influencers, and meme images to enhance their psychological impact. While most Taiwanese reject these arguments, these messages have nonetheless successfully reached their intended audiences.³

These controversial and misleading messages often originate from untraceable sources, and it would be imprudent to directly attribute all opposing views to information operations conducted by hostile or authoritarian states.⁴ However, it

² The Taiwan Information Environment Research Center (台灣資訊環境研究中心, IORG, originally named Information Operations Research Group), is a Taiwanese civil society organization dedicated to employing science and education to combat information manipulation, deepen comprehension of the Mandarin information landscape, foster rational public discourse, and fortify Taiwan’s democratic resilience. Founded in 2019 by media professionals, social scientists, data engineers, and activists in Taiwan, IORG is presently a registered legal entity in Taiwan, with its coordinating office situated in Taipei City. The referenced study can be found here: <https://iorg.tw/>.

³ The Institute of National Defense and Security Research commissioned the National Chengchi University Election Study Center to conduct a telephone survey from 23 to 29 March 2023. Respondents were asked the following questions: “Do you agree or disagree with this statement: U.S. military assistance to Taiwan will push Taiwan into war?” The survey results revealed that 60 percent of respondents disagreed, while 34 percent agreed. Additionally, respondents were asked, “If there is a war across Taiwan strait, do you think the United States will send troops to help Taiwan?” In response, 55 percent of respondents believed that the United States would provide assistance, whereas 37 percent believed it would not. See Liu Jieqiao, “國防民調呈現「疑美論」退燒及其省思,” Institute for national Defense and Security Research, March 2023, <https://indsr.org.tw/>.

⁴ Because democratic countries do not mandate real-name verification for Internet users and often maintain lax regulations and oversight concerning the personal information associated with accounts, authoritarian regimes and terrorist organizations frequently exploit this situation by deploying numerous fake accounts to disseminate false information.

may be feasible to identify such operations by observing patterns of coordinated inauthentic behavior (CIB).

Cyber and Information Threats from Authoritarian States

As explained in 2018 by Nathaniel Gleicher, head of cybersecurity policy at Facebook (META), CIB refers to the collaboration of groups of pages or individuals to deceive others about their identities or activities. Facebook took action against these networks or accounts due to their deceitful conduct, rather than the content they posted. Such behavior may stem from financial or ideological motivations.⁵

Additionally, Facebook released reports on CIB related to the PRC in 2019 and 2022. The 2019 report unveiled instances of CIB during the Hong Kong anti-extradition protests. Although attempts were made to conceal the identities of the involved users, investigations revealed links to individuals affiliated with the CCP government.⁶ The 2022 report focused on China and Russia. In the case of China, Facebook observed CIB activities targeting the United States, the Czech Republic, as well as Chinese- and French-speaking audiences worldwide. The report underscored a CCP-origin influence operation spanning multiple social media platforms, marking the first instance of such targeting US domestic politics ahead of the 2022 midterms, specifically aimed at Americans across the political spectrum. Previous Chinese influence operations primarily concentrated on criticizing the United States to international audiences rather than primarily targeting domestic US audiences.⁷

It is crucial to recognize that authoritarian states may exploit vulnerabilities in algorithms to ensure that controversial and misleading information reaches trending topics or is more readily accessible to users.⁸ FBI Director Christopher Wray testified before the US Senate Intelligence Committee in March 2023, acknowledging that Chinese-owned TikTok holds the power to shape narratives and sow division among Americans. He also highlighted that while TikTok is owned by a

⁵ Nathaniel Gleicher, "Coordinated Inauthentic Behavior Explained," *Facebook Newsroom*, 6 December 2018, <https://about.fb.com/>.

⁶ Nathaniel Gleicher, "Removing Coordinated Inauthentic Behavior From China," *Facebook Newsroom*, 19 August 2019, <https://about.fb.com/>.

⁷ Ben Nimmo, "Removing Coordinated Inauthentic Behavior From China and Russia," *Facebook Newsroom*, 27 September 2022, <https://about.fb.com/>.

⁸ Trending topics gain popularity either due to coordinated efforts by users or in response to events that spark discussions on specific subjects. Occasionally, trending topics are influenced by concerted efforts and manipulations from fans of particular celebrities. However, there is increasing scrutiny on whether authoritarian states might manipulate algorithms or employ puppet accounts to advance specific agendas and ideologies.

Chinese private company, the CCP has the capacity to control and utilize relevant personal data.⁹

In January 2024, Taiwan successfully conducted its presidential election. However, in the months leading up to the election, concerns were raised about potential interference from the PRC. Mr. Wellington Koo (顧立雄), Secretary-General of Taiwan's National Security Council, outlined strategies for potential Chinese interference in the 2024 presidential election during a media interview prior to the election. These strategies include fostering a hostile atmosphere against the current ruling party by amplifying missteps in policy, promoting skepticism toward the United States, and exploiting fears of war.¹⁰

Mr. Koo also emphasized that the approaches employed could be varied. The CCP might establish multi-channel networks on social media platforms such as YouTube, Facebook, Instagram, and TikTok to collectively influence public opinion. Coordinated accounts might be utilized to disseminate misleading messages. Additionally, the CCP may create organizations to assist content creators in producing and disseminating specific videos, with creators often entering into such partnerships in exchange for commercial revenues.

Moreover, Mr. Koo expressed concerns about the use of artificial intelligence and deep-fake technologies to generate misinformation and distort people's perceptions of politics. He noted that the cost for the CCP to engage in such interference is relatively low, while the expenses required to counteract CCP influence could be exceptionally high. Furthermore, those responsible for the production of deceptive information often adopt a strategy of silence following initial dissemination, making efforts to trace their origin nearly impossible. This deliberate tactic aims to obfuscate their true identity and motives.

Tactics and practices in information warfare from extremist organizations or authoritarian regimes are growing increasingly sophisticated and yielding detrimental effects. It is noteworthy that certain social media platforms, such as TikTok, may not prioritize profit as their primary motive, they are driven by other factors beyond financial gain. These platforms may play a role in influencing or promoting policies and ideologies aligned with specific organizations or authoritarian states. Additionally, they may rely on disseminating disinformation to further their agendas.¹¹

⁹ Danielle Wallace, "FBI Director Chris Wray testifies Chinese-owned TikTok has power to 'drive narratives,' 'divide Americans,'" *Fox News*, 28 March 2023, <https://www.foxbusiness.com/>.

¹⁰ Ching-en Chiou, "Lurking risks of Chinese influence in the presidential election coming up next year," *Radio Taiwan International*, 23 July 2023, <https://en.rti.org.tw/>.

¹¹ David Ingram and Kat Tenberge, "Critics renew calls for a TikTok ban, claiming platform has an anti-Israel bias," *NBC News*, 1 November 2023, <https://www.nbcnews.com/>.

How Should Democratic Countries Respond?

While most democratic nations are aware of the threat posed by influence operations from authoritarian states, and there is a consensus on the importance of enhancing media literacy and fostering information resilience among the public, the real challenge lies in effectively implementing and executing these measures.

For the government and armed forces of Taiwan, countering cognitive and influence operations from authoritarian states is an urgent and imperative task. According to the Taiwan *National Defense Report* released in 2023, the CCP continues to infiltrate and engage in media and internet activities. CCP's strategy involves fostering internal division and stirring discord within Taiwan to undermine public trust in the government. The CCP's methods include hacking and infiltrating the Internet, disseminating controversial messages, propagating extravagant propaganda, utilizing United Front tactics, and employing deliberate distortion, direct falsification, wedge-driving, and provocation.¹²

The CCP manipulates contentious issues in Taiwan with the goal of fostering social divisions, undermining unity among the populace, diminishing the morale of the military, and seeking to cultivate an unfavorable international environment/opinion toward Taiwan. Presently, the CCP has integrated cognitive warfare tactics into its "Three Warfares" strategy, United Front Work, and national security intelligence endeavors.¹³ These tactics span various levels, encompassing individuals, organizations, the military, and the state, thereby broadening the scope of engage-

¹² The United Front is a political strategy and initiative of the CCP, involving individuals, groups, and networks that are controlled by the Party and utilized to further its interests. For instance, the United Front Work Department, headed by the chief of the secretariat of the CCP's Central Committee, oversees front organizations and their affiliates in various countries, such as the Chinese Students and Scholars Association.

¹³ The "Three Warfares" constitutes a strategic approach employed by the CCP with multifaceted objectives:

Public Opinion Warfare: This facet endeavors to shape public opinion both domestically and internationally. The PLA perceives the mobilization of the Chinese public as advantageous for signaling resolve and deterring foreign incursions on Chinese interests.

Psychological Warfare: Utilizing propaganda, deception, threats, and coercion, this component aims to influence adversary decision-making processes while countering adversary psychological operations.

Legal Warfare: This component seeks to leverage legal systems to dissuade enemy attacks. Utilizing international and domestic law to legitimize and garner support for initiating the conflict, and to legally designate the enemy's action as unlawful.

These strategies serve to promote the CCP's national interests and undermine its adversaries' capacity to respond effectively. They operate within a broader strategic framework emphasizing coordination across various domains and government entities to prosecute warfare effectively. The Three Warfares strategy is designed to wield political power. Gaining insights into hybrid warfare according to Party theorists' perspectives enables decision makers to comprehensively counter the CCP's coercive objectives without necessitating a response to each individual coercive action undertaken by the Party.

ment and increasing complexity.¹⁴ Moreover, the defense report also suggests that misinformation and disinformation may negatively impact the perception and morale of military personnel, as well as public support for the national military.

Hence, the Ministry of National Defense (MND) of Taiwan actively enhances its capabilities in swiftly detecting, reporting, verifying, responding to, and tracing misinformation. The MND proactively disseminates accurate information to mitigate the impact of misinformation on military and national security.¹⁵

In addition to conducting comprehensive research on the tactics and objectives of cognitive warfare, the Taiwan MND has implemented a range of countermeasures in recent years. The military news unit maintains continuous vigilance over domestic and international news, ensuring prompt clarification of misinformation to neutralize its negative effects. This endeavor aims to enhance public understanding of the armed forces, thereby fostering support for the military. Moreover, two common defense educational materials, “Let’s Serve! (從軍出發)” and “Mobilizing Immediate Combat Power (動員即戰力),” have been newly compiled to integrate the concept of cognitive warfare into education and training initiatives.¹⁶

To bolster media literacy among active-duty forces, the Political Warfare Bureau (PWB) of the MND has devised specialized educational programs introducing the cognitive warfare tactics employed by the CCP. These programs are aired on “Juguang Park TV sessions (莒光園地),” an educational TV program broadcast nationwide, reaching both active-duty forces and civilians.

The Taiwan government revised educational recall for reservists to 14 days in response to the recognition that the reserve forces required further training to effectively prepare for potential military threats from Communist China. Additionally, the PWB was tasked with developing an additional national defense education program aimed at enhancing the media literacy of reservists. Furthermore, there has been a reform in the enlistment training curriculum commencing in 2024. This overhaul entails an augmentation of training hours and content for new recruits, encompassing both compulsory and volunteer service, with a specific emphasis on delineating the tactics and desired effects of the CCP’s influence operations. The objective is to aid new recruits in enhancing their media literacy and mitigating the impact of cognitive warfare orchestrated by authoritarian states.

Moreover, the PWB has been actively fortifying national defense education for the general public during peacetime. The PWB conducts diverse patriotic

¹⁴ *National Defense Report* (Taipei, Taiwan: Ministry of National Defense, 2023), 41–42, <https://www.mnd.gov.tw/>.

¹⁵ *National Defense Report*, 163.

¹⁶ *National Defense Report*, 80.

and educational initiatives to bolster the populace's resolve to withstand threats from adversaries.

Major General Lou Wei-Chieh, director of the Cultural Publicity and Psychological Operations Division at the PWB, emphasized in a media interview in June 2023 that Taiwan plays a pivotal role in regional stability. He highlighted that the Taiwan military upholds principles of non-provocation and strives to avoid escalating conflicts, employing proactive measures to counter the enemy's cognitive warfare. Major General Lou underscored that the proactive measures adopted by the military do not equate to "offensive cognitive warfare." He emphasized that Ukraine's approach in shaping discourse and public opinion during its conflict with Russia serves as an invaluable lesson for Taiwan. The objective of proactive measures is to bolster societal resilience and foster mutual trust between the military and the public by projecting an image of well-trained and formidable armed forces in Taiwan.

Furthermore, various activities, graphics, and videos are utilized to instill confidence in the populace and mitigate the impact of cognitive warfare from the CCP. This approach resembles the concept of "vaccination" against Chinese influence, serving as a preventive measure to enhance immunity.¹⁷

Building Resistance and Resilience

The international landscape and geopolitical dynamics are evolving rapidly, with terms like resistance and resilience garnering significant attention in the global arena and serving as benchmarks for assessing a nation's strength. At the national level, resilience denotes the capacity of a healthy democratic society to withstand outside attempts by other countries or entities to manipulate the free will of its citizens. These influences encompass influencing voting behavior, shaping support for national policies and defense readiness, and swaying democratic values and beliefs. All free and democratic nations, including Taiwan, are currently confronting similar challenges.

Authoritarian states and extremist organizations, in their quest for global power and influence, exploit the vulnerabilities inherent in free speech within democratic countries. They achieve this by disseminating false information and promoting extremist rhetoric, with the objective of inciting and manipulating public opinion. The repercussions of these actions extend beyond impacting election outcomes; they deliberately disrupt and manipulate the decision-making processes surrounding public policies.

¹⁷ Tu Ju-min, "主動認知作戰抗中假訊息 樓偉傑少將：強化嚇阻增加軍民互信," *Liberty Times Net*, 23 June 2023, <https://news.ltn.com.tw/>.

While most democratic countries and their allies acknowledge the significance of comprehending the tactics employed by hostile forces in influence operations, as well as enhancing media literacy among the public, the true challenge lies in cultivating and implementing these capabilities effectively. The initiatives undertaken by Taiwan and its MND could serve as invaluable lessons and models for allies and like-minded countries in the Indo-Pacific region. 🌟

COL Hsu Min-Cheng, Taiwan Army

Min-Cheng Hsu is a colonel in the Taiwan Army and currently is a doctoral student in the National Defense University in Taiwan. His interest of research includes public policy, political communication, strategical communication, China studies, and data science. For more than 21 years of service, Hsu has worked in the Political Warfare and Information Operations Field in various positions. He served as political warfare and cadet counselor in company level from 2003 to 2011, commander of cadet company, public affairs staff officer in the Army Command Headquarters, political warfare section chief in 584 Armored Brigade, squadron commander of the Psychological Warfare Group, political warfare staff officer in Ministry of National Defense in Taiwan. Colonel Hsu holds a BA in journalism from National Defense University (Taiwan) and a Master of Public Policy and Management from University of Southern California.