

# Sharp Power and its Effects on Democracy

Estoril Political Forum

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# Understanding Influence in a Globalized, Intensely Competitive Environment

- Overarching assumptions of three decades ago challenged
- Integration as democratizing force
- Soft power concept arrived at the Cold War's end
- Influence seen through a particular lens

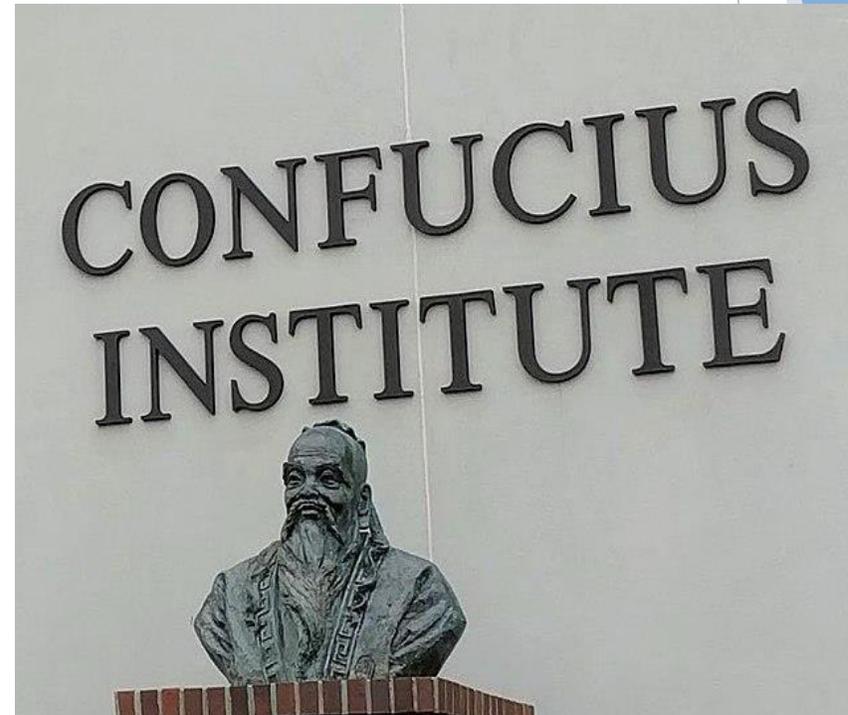


# Authoritarian Powers “Reverse Engineer” Globalization

- Assumptions about authoritarian direction
- An underestimation of authoritarian state power
- Reverse engineering of key aspects of globalization

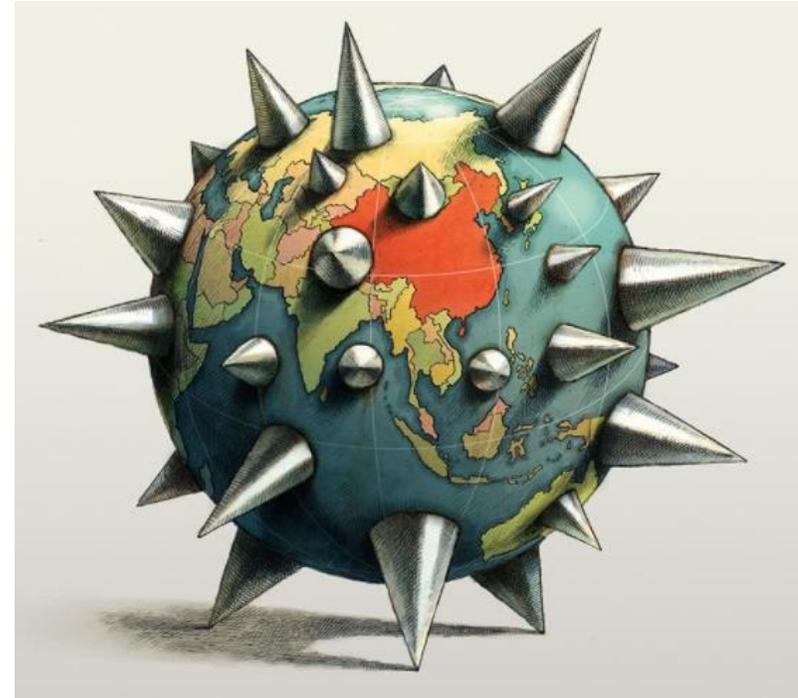
# Reverse Engineering Globalization

- ▶ In China, authoritarian leaders engage in widespread academic censorship – while at same time plowing huge resources into R & D and higher education.
- ▶ Authorities in Beijing - as well as Moscow, Tehran and Riyadh - do same with media: Systematic censorship while investing massively in international media.



# Authoritarians Have Strong Preferences

- Autocrats not agnostic about freedoms of expression or association
- Internationally engaged authoritarian powers don't leave preferences at home
- Effects of certain influence from China, Russia, Gulf states:
  - Censorship
  - Compromising forms of engagement
  - Degrading of institutions
    - Secrecy as a norm



["What to Do About China's 'Sharp Power',"](#) *The Economist*, December 14, 2017.

# Compromising Effects of Sharp Power

- Sharp Power effects:
  - Monopolizing ideas
  - Suppressing alternative narratives
  - Exploiting partner institutions



“Presidents Xi Jinping, Cyril Ramaphosa and Vladimir Putin in Johannesburg,” from Henry Foy, Nastassia Astrasheuskaya, and David Pilling, [“Russia: Vladimir Putin’s Pivot to Africa,”](#) *Financial Times*, January 22, 2019.



# Sharp Power Effects

- Authoritarian powers' default position >>> Take away agency, from:
  - Knowledge sector
  - Information and Media
  - Technology
  - Activists (transnational repression)



**Even on U.S. Campuses, China Cracks  
Down on Students Who Speak Out**

**POLITICO**

**Brussels rebukes its Beijing  
envoy over censorship of EU  
letter**

**theinterpreter**

**Cut! How Hollywood  
self-censors on China**

**Repression of Activists**

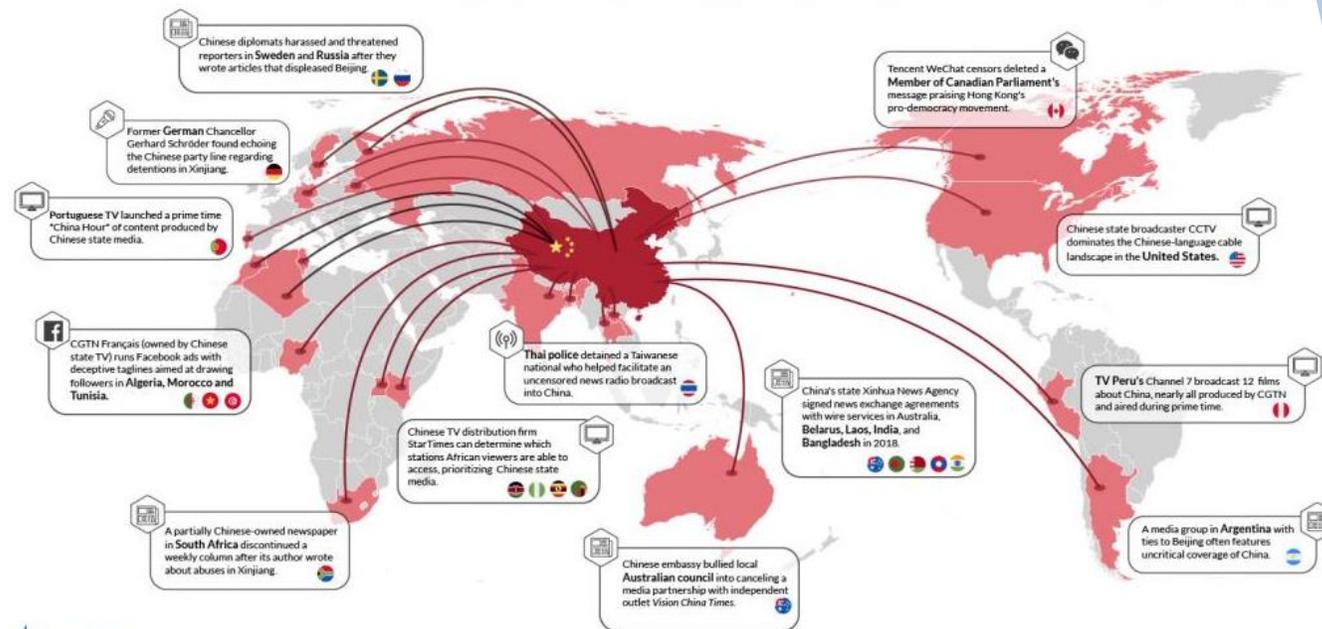
# Authoritarian State-Aligned Media Goes Global

## TOP 5 STORIES BY PUBLIC FACEBOOK ENGAGEMENT

AS OF MAY 7, 2020

OUTLET	HEADLINE	PUBLIC FACEBOOK ENGAGEMENTS (SHARES, COMMENTS, REACTIONS)
SPUTNIK NEWS	TWITTER EXPLODES AFTER 'TRUMP' YARMULKES APPEAR AT REPUBLICAN JEWISH COALITION <small>(APRIL 7, 2019)</small>	222,991
RT	GEN Z: TAINTED BY VAPING & OPIOID EPIDEMICS? <small>(NOVEMBER 9, 2019)</small>	220,276
RT	I AM AN AMERICAN CONSTITUTIONAL LAWYER. AND I SEE OUR GOVERNMENT USING COVID-19 TO TAKE AWAY OUR FUNDAMENTAL RIGHTS <small>(MARCH 22, 2020)</small>	202,484
SPUTNIK NEWS	SECOND WAVE OF MISSILE ATTACKS FIRED AGAINST US TARGETS IN IRAQ-IRANIAN MEDIA <small>(JANUARY 8, 2019)</small>	155,671
PRESS TV	UK PRINCE HARRY SAYS TRUMP IS ONE OF THE 'SICK PEOPLE' RUNNING THE WORLD <small>(MARCH 11, 2020)</small>	115,387

Cyrena Kokolis, "Comparing the Social Media Reach of Chinese, Iranian and Russian State-Sponsored News Outlets," Foreign Policy Research Institute, May 8, 2020.



"Beijing's Global Reach: Selected Cases of Chinese Influence Abroad," from Sarah Repucci, "Freedom and the Media 2019: A Downward Spiral," Freedom House, June 2019.



From left to right, forced confessions that were broadcast on state TV in China, Russia, and Belarus, respectively, from "Victims of 'Forced Confessions' Urge Western Powers to Ban Chinese TV Channels," France 24, April 12, 2021; "Ukrainian Reporter Held by Moscow-Backed Separatists Forced to Confess in Russia State TV Interview," Committee to Protect Journalists, August 22, 2018; and Anton Troianovski and Ivan Nechepurenko, "Putin Seeks Distance From Belarus Turmoil and Says Russia Is 'Neutral'," New York Times, June 4, 2021.

# How is Success Defined?

- Does autocratic leadership seek “favorability” or “love”?
- Or, more appropriately:  
Reverence?  
Compliance?  
Deference?  
Obedience?

The  
Economist

China is spending billions to make the world love it

Can money buy that sort of thing?



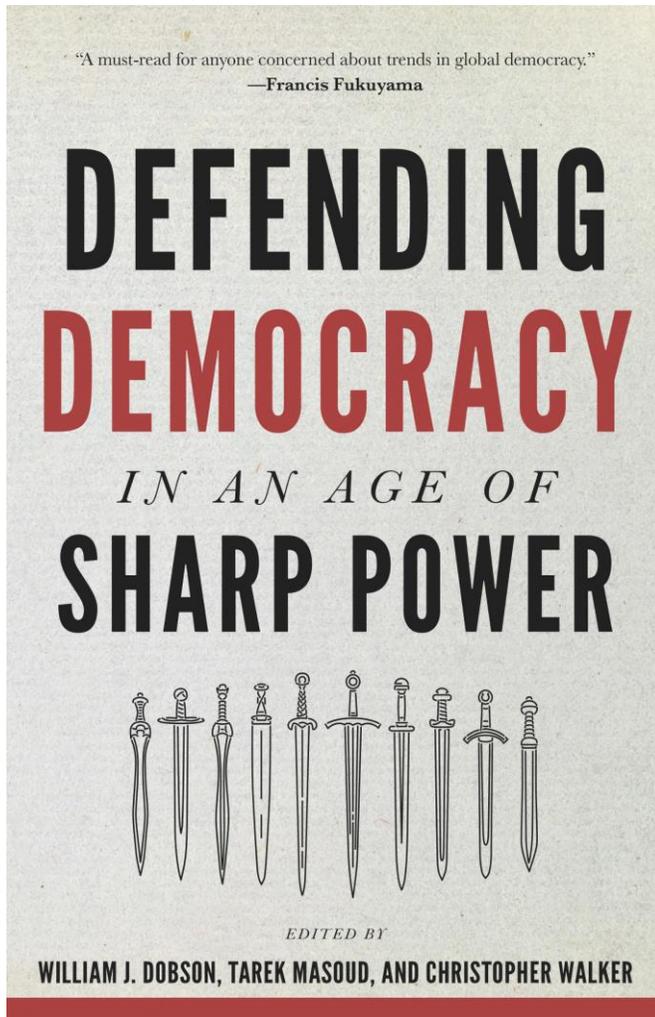
# What Can (Must) Free Societies Do?

- Efforts of a full spectrum of institutions within open societies
- Civil society can help address persistent political-literacy gaps regarding China and Russia. This sector must be alert to risks of engagement with global authoritarian powers, can serve as a vital line of defense that reinforces the institutional integrity of democracies
- Democratic unity in face of authoritarian division: Leaders of critical institutions in free societies should find strength in numbers when fending off the authoritarian threat
- Democracies must “get their own house in order” - but they cannot afford to ignore the world around them while they do so

Sector	Nongovernmental Response	Location	Details
Media	Discontinuing paid advertorials	United States, United Kingdom	Several prominent U.S. and British news outlets discontinued some or all paid advertorial supplements from Chinese state media. The outlets include the <i>Telegraph</i> , the <i>Economist</i> , the <i>New York Times</i> , and the <i>Washington Post</i> . <sup>72</sup>
Media	Launching independent digital media start-ups	Taiwan, Hong Kong	Professional journalists, dissatisfied with growing self-censorship in mainstream media due to CCP influence, launched alternative digital news outlets like <i>Storm Media</i> , <i>New Talk</i> , <i>InMedia</i> , <i>Hong Kong Free Press</i> , and <i>Initium Media</i> .
Media	Rejecting paid content containing clearly defamatory disinformation	Argentina	At least three outlets refused a bid by a local intermediary for a Chinese agent to publish a questionable article that vilified local Falun Gong practitioners as a threat to public health during the COVID-19 pandemic. <sup>73</sup>
Media	Publishing in-depth reports on China's media influence in the local media market	Thailand, Sri Lanka	The <i>Thai Inquirer</i> and the <i>Colombo Gazette</i> published lengthy features on Xinhua and other Chinese state outlets' penetration of their respective local media markets. <sup>74</sup>
Media	Engaging in collective industry pushback	Ghana	The Ghanaian Independent Broadcasters Association issued a letter to regulators that voiced concerns about a potential US \$95 million contract with Beijing-based StarTimes to build Ghana's digital television infrastructure, urging the government to use local firms and protect the broadcast sector from content controls promoted by Beijing.
Media	Exposing Chinese embassy efforts to dictate local media coverage	India	An Indian journalist exposed a threatening Chinese embassy letter sent to 250 reporters that demanded adherence to Chinese government phrases when reporting on Taiwan's National Day, prompting broader pushback. <sup>75</sup>
Media	Publishing contextualized, objective reporting after being taken on Chinese government-sponsored tours in Xinjiang	Albania, Jordan	A journalist and a university lecturer from Muslim-majority countries were taken on tours of Xinjiang, including detention facilities, and investigated beyond the official Chinese government narrative, relaying descriptions of heavy security restrictions and closed mosques. <sup>76</sup>
Media	Submitting complaints to local redress mechanism for suspicious dismissal	Canada	An editor from the <i>Global Chinese Press</i> filed a complaint with the British Columbia Human Rights Tribunal over an apparent dismissal for actions that were disliked by Beijing. <sup>77</sup>
Media/Civil Society	Balancing opinion editorials published by Chinese diplomats	Chile	After China's ambassador published an op-ed in <i>El Mercurio</i> that attacked a Chilean legislator for visiting leaders of the democracy movement in Hong Kong, Fundación para el Progreso wrote a letter to the editor and helped Hong Kong activist Joshua Wong translate and place a response article. <sup>78</sup>
Media/Civil Society	Disinformation campaign detection and analysis	Italy, Serbia, Taiwan	Media and civil society groups— <i>Formiche</i> , <sup>79</sup> Digital Forensics Center, <sup>80</sup> and Doublethink Lab <sup>81</sup> —engaged in detection and forensic analysis of disinformation campaigns on Twitter, Facebook, and LINE.

“Building Resilience to Sharp Power Across the Media Ecosystem,” from Sarah Cook, “China’s Global Media Footprint: Democratic Responses to Expanding Authoritarian Influence,” *Sharp Power and Democratic Resilience Series*, February 2021.

# What Can (Must) Free Societies Do?



- In a fiercely competitive environment:
  - New Quality of Preparation
  - Roll Back Secrecy/Support Openness
  - Rebuff Elite Capture
  - Vigorously Defend Freedom of Expression
  - Compete More Purposefully in the Global Media Sphere