

# 08

## **New Messengers: The Role of Traditional and New Media in China's External Messaging During India–China Border Crises**

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### **Abstract**

This chapter analyses the evolution of the Communist Party of China's external messaging targeting Indian audiences on traditional and new media platforms, including prominent, global social media, during the recent India–China border crises in 2017 and 2020. Following a push by President Xi Jinping in 2013 to “tell China's story well”, the country's state media outlets have launched ambitious efforts to boost China's messaging among Indian audiences. These efforts include advertorials published in Indian newspapers, fellowship programmes to host Indian journalists in China, and reaching out directly to Indian audiences through global social media platforms such as Twitter and YouTube. By embracing new media platforms, the Communist Party is now able to reach out to audiences in India directly as well as insert itself into domestic political debates—as seen during the border crises. This media strategy involves close coordination between traditional and new media. While the latter largely follows the narrative set by the traditional Party media, it has been given some space to refine the message to appeal to a foreign audience. However, broadcasting the official message abroad has invited new challenges for China, as it wrestles with the tension between domestic propaganda goals aimed at building support for the Party at home and external-messaging efforts to boost its image abroad. As China's messaging efforts during the crisis in Doklam in 2017 and following the Galwan Valley clash in 2020 showed, resolving this tension between domestic and foreign audiences remains a key challenge for the nation.

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## Introduction

New media has emerged as a powerful platform for the Communist Party of China's (CPC) messaging, both at home and abroad. This chapter explores how global social media platforms are being used to amplify the message of traditional Party media outlets in the context of India–China relations, specifically, during the border crises in 2017 and 2020. Global social media platforms such as Twitter have become important information battlegrounds to sway narratives and influence public opinion.

One such battle played out on social media during the India–China border crisis of 2020, particularly in the wake of the clash on June 15, 2020, in Galwan Valley, which marked the most serious violence on the India–China border since 1967. Still, the 2020 crisis was not the first instance where social media played a prominent role. The 2017 border stand-off in Doklam, along the India–China–Bhutan trijunction, was a seminal moment for China in testing out a new information strategy. As the PLA's Western Theater Command put it following the stand-off, the strategy combined radio, TV, newspaper, and social media messaging to push China's narrative at home as well as abroad (Tu & Ge, 2018).

This chapter will assess the evolution of China's external messaging aimed at Indian audiences by examining its strategy across traditional and new media. By 'traditional' media, this chapter refers to Party-run newspapers and television. 'New' media refers to the use of digital platforms. However, the two categories are not distinct, considering that the most prominent users of Twitter and Facebook in China are Party-media organisations that are permitted to use platforms that are otherwise banned in China.

By embracing new media platforms, the Party is now able to reach out to audiences in India and around the world directly, which has enabled it to insert itself into domestic political debates. This evolving media strategy involves

close coordination between traditional and new media, wherein the latter largely follows the narrative set by traditional Party media, but it is given some space to refine the message to appeal to a global audience.

Delivering domestic messaging to foreign audiences has created new challenges for China, as it wrestles with the tension between domestic propaganda goals that are aimed at building support for the Party at home and external messaging efforts to boost China's image abroad. These two goals, as the India–China border crises showed, are not always aligned. Resolving this tension between domestic and global audiences remains a key challenge for China's external messaging.

## Telling China's story well

The increasing importance of social media in the context of India–China relations was felt during the 2017 stand-off in Doklam. However, the rise of social media in China had dramatically altered the media landscape years before Doklam with the launch of the microblogging platform Weibo by the Internet giant Sina in 2009—the same year that China banned Twitter and YouTube in the aftermath of the riots in Xinjiang (July 2017). This was followed by the launch of WeChat by Tencent in 2011, which is an extraordinarily broad platform that spans instant messaging, a Facebook-like social network, along with an online payment system and e-commerce.

Social media was initially seen as a threat to the Communist Party's monopoly over information, allowing Internet users to post information that would ordinarily be censored by state media, triggering a tug-of-war between Internet users and the state. The CPC, however, became increasingly adept in asserting its control over this new domain through a combination of censorship and the use of sophisticated approaches to steer the conversation (Qin, Strömberg & Wu, 2017). Chinese social media platforms emerged as a useful outlet for authorities to not only monitor local issues and protests

and gauge public sentiment but also to disseminate propaganda through a layered apparatus, comprising official government accounts, official media, individual journalists, and a network of tens of thousands of pro-government accounts that are sometimes disparagingly called the ‘50 cent party’ in China, as that is the amount they are supposedly paid per post (Qin, Strömberg & Wu, 2017).

In this new social media landscape, the focus of China’s information strategy evolved from merely restricting information that is deemed sensitive to a more sophisticated approach of ‘guiding public opinion’. This applied to both internal and external messaging. As Xi Jinping put it in an ideology work conference in 2013, China’s media needed to prioritise “telling China’s story well” while “meticulously and properly conducting external propaganda, innovating external propaganda methods, working hard to create new concepts, new categories and new expressions that integrate the Chinese and the foreign, telling China’s story well, and communicating China’s voice well” (Bandurski, 2020).

### China's external messaging in India: Traditional platforms

The 2013 ideology work conference was a major turning point in China’s external messaging efforts, heralding changes in China’s external propaganda on traditional as well as new platforms. With a more ambitious plan backed by a flood of funding, the conference accelerated traditional Chinese broadcasters’ efforts to go global. Two new global hubs of CGTN or the *China Global Television Network*—a rebranding and expansion of China Central Television’s English-language channel—were launched in Kenya and the United States.

China’s ‘big four’ Party media—China Central Television (CCTV), People’s Daily (includes *Renmin Ribao*, the flagship Chinese newspaper; *People’s Daily*, an English-

language website, and the Chinese and English editions of *Global Times*, or *Huanqiu Shibao*), *Xinhua News Agency*, and China Radio International (CRI)—all play key roles in external messaging. CGTN has had to rely on social media platforms such as YouTube and Facebook to grow its footprint as it faces regulatory hurdles in securing broadcast rights in many markets, for instance, in the UK and Australia (Tobitt, 2021). The channel is not widely available in India as well. However, it has grown its footprint on YouTube and has 2.82 million subscribers as of May 2022 (CGTN, n.d.). As part of its effort to go global, as well as to reach more Indian viewers, CGTN has hired international editors to refine its message and has sought out Indian journalists to help further its reach in recent years. As of August 2022, the channel employed at least four senior Indian editors in its headquarters in Beijing, all of whom had previously worked on Indian television channels.

CGTN is not alone in recruiting Indian journalists. *China Daily*, the official English-language newspaper of the State Council of the People’s Republic of China, employs at least three senior Indian editors. Journalists from India have been sought not only for their English-language skills but to help engage an Indian audience, which has emerged as the most significant source of traffic for English-language Chinese media after the US.<sup>1</sup> China Radio International (CRI), the most prominent official radio station, operates Hindi, Tamil, and Bangla stations, which employ Indian journalists. According to CRI, which also runs a network of listeners’ fan clubs in India and arranges for listeners to travel to China, its Tamil station is the most popular among its 53 international channels. The content focuses mostly on cultural issues, such as the history of China and the historical and civilizational links between India and China (Krishnan, 2013).

Another part of the effort to “tell China’s story well” is China’s purchase of advertorials in major foreign newspapers around the world, including those in India (Lim & Bergen, 2018).

<sup>1</sup> Interview with an employee at a Chinese-state media organisation, Beijing, August 2018.

In 2020 and 2021, *China Daily* purchased several advertorials in Indian newspapers. Labelled ‘China Watch’, the advertorial included several pages of content that resembled news articles. A small label saying ‘advertorial’ in the corner of the first page was the only marker of it being paid content (Bagree, 2021; Deb, 2021). The Chinese Embassy in India also purchases advertorials in major Indian newspapers separately, a practice that predates the more recent launch of ‘China Watch’, to mark political anniversaries or showcase examples of China’s development, such as a 2019 advertorial headlined “Nathula: A Gateway of Friendship Where Hearts Meet” that detailed the efforts made by Chinese authorities to welcome Indian pilgrims on the Kailash pilgrimage as well as “Tibet Day” supplements to mark the anniversary of what China calls its ‘peaceful liberation’ of Tibet in 1951.

In terms of shaping Indian newspapers’ coverage of China, the most significant initiative in recent years was the launch of the South Asia Press Center in Beijing in 2015. The centre is run by the China Public Diplomacy Association, controlled by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA). Starting in 2016, the MFA has hosted around 100 foreign journalists from leading media houses in Asia and Africa. As part of an arrangement between the Chinese Embassy in New Delhi and the Indian media, reporters live in Beijing for 10 months, are paid monthly stipends, and are taken on all expenses-covered tours twice every month to different Chinese provinces. The first two cohorts of the programme were also awarded degrees in International Relations from Renmin University in Beijing, although this was subsequently discontinued (Krishnan, 2018).

The programme is modelled on fellowships hosted by the US State Department and other foreign governments and is the first of its kind for China. It was first launched for African journalists when Beijing set up a China Africa Press Center. After a successful test run, the China South Asia Press Center and the China Southeast Asia Press Center were launched. The journalists who are part of these programmes

are accredited with these press centres and not their respective media outlets—an important distinction that limits the scope of their coverage and travel in China. Thus, the journalists are not stationed as correspondents of their newspapers but on visas hosted by the MFA. During the 10-month stay, they cannot undertake individual reporting trips unaccompanied by government minders as they are not independently accredited and, hence, are limited from reporting on issues deemed ‘sensitive’—from human rights to Tibet and Xinjiang. There have been three cohorts since the programme was launched. The Indian media organisations that participated in the programme include the Indo-Asian News Service (IANS), *Jansatta*, and *The Indian Express* (Krishnan, 2018).

The programme, which resumed in 2022 after a two-year gap on account of China’s COVID-19 travel restrictions, is a key element in the effort to “tell China’s story well” by overcoming the credibility gap suffered by Chinese organisations. Here, China’s story is being told well by foreign voices on their platforms. All three Indian organisations involved in the programme published reports from their correspondents without mentioning that their reports were on a Chinese government-hosted fellowship. When the programme was launched in 2016, none of these organisations had bureaus in China. The only Indian organisations present in China were the Press Trust of India, *The Hindu*, *India Today*, *Hindustan Times*, and *The Times of India* (IANS subsequently opened a bureau, which it has now discontinued). For the organisations, this presented a cost-effective way to cover China without spending on correspondents. The *Indian Express* said it did not see any conflict of interest in this arrangement, noting that, “The Chinese Embassy fellowship does provide a stipend but the journalists in the programme are paid their full salaries by *The Indian Express* for the entire duration of the programme. Just like all programmes, *The Indian Express* reporters participate in, there are no terms or conditions, no caution or advisory imposed on what they report from there. The work the fellows have done from Beijing speaks for itself” (Krishnan, 2018).



## The rise of new media

While traditional media platforms remain an important platform for China's messaging, social media has emerged as an information battleground. Media outlets are increasingly focusing on Twitter, Facebook, and YouTube, all three of which are banned in China. A presence on social media is the most effective route to Indian audiences. For example, *CGTN* relies on YouTube to reach foreign audiences. Similarly, the *Global Times* (English) and *People's Daily* (English) use Twitter and Facebook and have 1.8 million and 6.8 million followers on Twitter, respectively. *People's Daily* is particularly active on Facebook and has 86 million followers. In comparison, *The Times of India*, India's biggest media outlet, has 10 million followers on Facebook.

The use of global social media is not limited to Chinese media. The MFA and its diplomats are increasingly active on Twitter as well. According to a study by The Associated Press and the Oxford Internet Institute (Kinetz, 2021), as of early 2021, at least 270 Chinese diplomats in 126 countries are active on Twitter and Facebook. The same study found that they posted close to one million times across 449 official accounts on Twitter and Facebook between June 2020 and February 2021. These posts were shared more than 27 million times. The study found that three-quarters of Chinese diplomats on Twitter joined the platform in the period since May 2019 (Kinetz, 2021).

The Chinese Embassy in India as well as its spokespersons have used Twitter to communicate China's stand not only on India–China relations but also to critique Indian media coverage of China. In 2020 and 2021, the Chinese Embassy issued several statements, particularly on the Indian media reportage of COVID-19's origins and on the coverage of Taiwan. The Embassy spokesperson tweeted in response to media interviews of Taiwan officials that the “Taiwan question is the red line that cannot be challenged” and that the Chinese side “urge relevant Indian media to take a correct stance on issues of core interests

concerning China's sovereignty & territorial integrity.” If the attempts appear to be aimed at shaping how Indian media cover issues sensitive to China, then whether the tweets and statements succeeded in doing so is less clear (Wang, 2021; Sharma, 2020).

## Taking its cue: Coordination between old and new media in external messaging during border crises

The border stand-off in Doklam in 2017, the first major India–China crisis in this changing information landscape, was seen by those studying China's media as “a game-changer”, marking a new approach in China's external messaging (Haidar, 2020). Border stand-offs between India and China in the past were given relatively muted coverage by Chinese media and were often only mentioned in cursory statements by the MFA that described the border dispute as being “left over from history” and were faithfully reproduced in official media outlets (*Xinhua*, 2021). The stand-off in Doklam was marked by a multi-pronged messaging strategy. The objective was “to fully integrate the publicity forces of public opinion, radio, TV, newspapers and social media, and carry out a multi-wave and high-density centralized publicity in a fixed period to form favourable public opinion situation to allow for a final victory” (Tu & Ge, 2018).

This full integration of media was applied domestically within China as well, where there were campaigns on Weibo, such as the one by *People's Daily* (*Renmin Ribao*), popularising the hashtag “The border line is the bottom line”, which went viral in China, and abroad, where Chinese media organisations put out multimedia content aimed at a global audience. One prominent example was a three-and-a-half-minute-long, English-language video published by the *Xinhua News Agency* and shared on YouTube, Facebook, and Twitter. A version with Chinese subtitles was released within China on domestic platforms. The contrasting responses the video received within and outside China underline the

challenges faced by China's media in putting out messages that can resonate with foreign and domestic audiences alike. Titled 'The Spark: 7 Sins of India', the video listed 'seven sins' or wrongs committed by India during the border dispute.

The video is an example of how new media communication closely adheres to the party line but is given some space to tailor the presentation of official arguments. The 'sins' mirrored what the MFA had said in official statements. The video, however, attempted to present the arguments in more accessible language. It featured a conversation between an English-speaking female anchor and a man dressed in a turban and beard and speaking in a mock Indian accent. The video immediately triggered a backlash not only in India but elsewhere in the world and was described in news reports as racist (Hu, 2017).

Following the end of the stand-off, Tu Ling and Ge Xiangran, two strategists with the Joint Staff Department of the People's Liberation Army's (PLA) Western Theater, the military command which was responsible for dealing with the stand-off, published a lengthy analysis of the media strategy on the WeChat account of the Western Command (Tu & Ge, 2018). The analysis reads, "On this 'no-smoke battlefield, we comprehensively used various communication platforms...and always maintained the absolute superiority of the legal struggle against India." They conclude that "initiative is the key of public opinion struggle" and "whoever grasps it will have an advantage, and whoever loses it will fall into passivity." They argue that "To disclose the truth in time and seize the legal high ground, is the key to grasp the initiative of the legal struggle of public opinion" (Tu & Ge, 2018).

The key takeaway from their analysis is the dovetailing of official government announcements, official media coverage, and social media campaigns. Their analysis presents a detailed, chronological breakdown of how this coordinated messaging strategy unfolded. As an example of this coordination,

they note that on August 3 and 4, 2017, "six ministries and agencies" of China—which they identify as the Ministry of Defense, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Chinese Embassy in India, *People's Daily* (*Renmin Ribao*), *PLA Daily* (*Jiefangjun Bao*), and *Xinhua*—issued their views on the incident. They write that subsequently, media outlets, such as the *Global Times* (*Huanqiu Shibao*), which is one step lower in the hierarchy, amplified and reposted the message published in the *People's Daily* on social media, thereby "quickly forming a wave of public opinion and promoting the widespread dissemination of pictures and evidence of illegal Indian Army crossing the border." (Tu & Ge, 2018)

Meanwhile, the English-language arms of these media organisations translated the content for their foreign audience. The strategists write, "We should choose the right time to produce evidence, grasp the favourable time to publish evidence, and maximize the publicity effect," adding that it is also key to have "adequate preparation" to "counter" what the other side says. In their view, this media strategy effectively responded to the "three excuses concocted by the Indian side", which were that they were protecting Bhutan, preserving the status quo of the trijunction, and had legitimate security concerns regarding China's road construction. Three counterarguments were emphasised and disseminated to ensure consistency in messaging. Firstly, it was "repeatedly emphasised that Donglang always belonged to China and Bhutan is a sovereign country so India as a third party has no right to intervene." Secondly, it was argued that the "border crossing point of the Indian border forces is 2,000 metres from and has nothing to do with the trijunction." Thirdly, following the lead of the Foreign Ministry, the media pointed to "UN Resolution 3314 to show there can be no justification, political, economic, military or other, for the invasion or attack of the territory of another State by armed forces of one State" (Tu & Ge, 2018).

The PLA's analysis of the Doklam media strategy presented it as an unqualified success

domestically. Within China, the heated campaign garnered wide attention, including the support of Chinese public figures. Yet, whether this succeeded externally and in convincing the world of China's arguments is far less clear since messaging, when travelling beyond borders, can get lost in translation—as is evidenced by the *Xinhua* video.

A similar dynamic played out three years later during the border crisis of 2020 when China's media organisations launched another multi-wave and high-density messaging campaign, which was successful at home but arguably less so abroad. The Galwan clash of June 15, 2020, was a bigger challenge for China's messaging. Twenty Indian soldiers and at least four Chinese soldiers died in the clash. For eight months after the clash, Beijing kept silent and did not confirm that it had lost lives in the immediate aftermath of the clash. It was only in February 2021 that China's messaging strategy came into play. According to a Chinese media analyst based in Beijing, one possible reason for the delay may have been a desire to let the public passion in the aftermath of the clash subside.<sup>2</sup>

A high-intensity media campaign was built on an announcement by China that the PLA was honouring the four soldiers who had died. A documentary about the clash was played on the official broadcaster CCTV and portrayed India as the aggressor. Clips showed Indian troops crossing the Galwan river and Chinese soldiers standing their ground. What was left unsaid was that, as the Indian government suggested, the Chinese had transgressed the LAC in the valley first and had sparked the crisis (Tribune News Service, 2020).

The documentary was simultaneously broadcast with English subtitles on *CGTN*'s network as well as on its YouTube, Facebook, and Twitter platforms. The original documentary had been produced with the blessings of the Chinese military, part of a

broader propaganda push that followed China's announcement that it had lost four soldiers in the clash. *CGTN* aired a subtitled version, titled 'Revealing truth on border clashes with India helps understand events', as part of Beijing's efforts to portray to the world its version of events. This version received 282,000 views.<sup>3</sup>

The post-Galwan messaging strategy extended the cross-platform coordination to global social media platforms on a scale that exceeded what was seen during the Doklam crisis. Here, many 'unofficial' voices were also incorporated in the messaging, unlike during Doklam, when it was limited to official media. During the Galwan crisis, unverified images, first shared on Chinese social media such as Weibo and WeChat, were subsequently posted on Twitter by social media handles that had somewhat unclear links with the Chinese government. Two particularly active Twitter handles during the Galwan crisis were Shen Shiwei, who described himself as an analyst without mentioning that he is a reporter for *CGTN*, and Eva Zheng, an account of a person who appears to be a Chinese national based in Pakistan at some point. The latter routinely posts detailed information on China's military deployments on the India border and China–Pakistan relations and is also followed by several Chinese diplomats.

The use of social media during the Galwan clash allowed China to share its message directly with the Indian audience. In February 2021, Eva Zheng shared unverified images on Twitter that showed Indian soldiers tied up and held captive by the PLA in Galwan Valley (Zheng, 2021). The images appear to have been leaked by the Chinese military and were first posted on Weibo by popular "military fans" social media accounts that routinely post information about the military, usually in a positive light, but do not have any formal official linkages. These images were subsequently widely shared by Indian social media users.

<sup>2</sup> Interview with the author in February 2021.

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3cw2pWd3Sqc> accessed in March 2021.

Another post that garnered wide traction in India was a video by Shen Shiwei on January 1, 2022, showing PLA soldiers raising the Chinese flag in an unspecified location in Galwan Valley. The video, which garnered 1.7 million views on Twitter, triggered a heated political debate in India and led the opposition to ask the Modi government to “break its silence” and explain how the Chinese unfurled a Chinese flag in Galwan valley (Mohan, 2022). Indian officials later said that the flag-raising did not take place in the contested buffer zone in Galwan Valley but on the Chinese side of the LAC—a fact that was lost in the furore over the video. Subsequently, India staged a flag-raising to respond to the video (Press Trust of India, 2022). In the aftermath of the Galwan clash, fake “Chinese” Twitter accounts that shared images and videos of questionable authenticity mushroomed. These new accounts were earlier Pakistan-linked Twitter accounts that tweeted in Urdu, which subsequently assumed a ‘Chinese’ identity to spread disinformation about the clash. For example, the account ‘xiuying637’ was earlier run as ‘hinaarbi2’ while the handles ‘sawaxpx’ and ‘Zeping’, written in Chinese characters, tweeted in Urdu at one time. The accounts were eventually suspended (Krishnan, 2020).

The wide traction that the Chinese images and videos from the February 2021 publicity campaign received on Twitter shows China’s ability to insert itself into domestic debates abroad. Both posts—particularly the Galwan Valley flag video—triggered heated political debates in India, even eliciting a response from the leader of the opposition party, who criticised government inaction over the issue. While these new multi-platform and high-intensity campaigns—along with censorship, including the arrests of online commentators who questioned the military’s version of events (Krishnan, 2021)—were able to mute criticism largely and rally support for the military within China, assessing their impact abroad on shaping views about China is harder. After all, if the broader goal of China’s external messaging is aimed at creating more favourable

views towards China abroad, the stream of propaganda on the border arguably achieved the opposite result in India.

Recent examples suggest that broadcasting domestic messaging abroad remains a challenge for the Chinese propaganda machinery, as it is still learning how to produce content which will resonate with foreign audiences. The *Xinhua* video and the backlash it caused serve as examples of how content tailored for a domestic audience might not work abroad. Another case in point is a message posted on Weibo by a top Chinese law enforcement body mocking the number of COVID-19 deaths in India. The account posted two images of a rocket launch in China and an Indian cremation ground with the caption, “China lighting a fire, India lighting a fire” to its 15 million followers. The message was cheered by some nationalists in China but was met with revulsion in India. The post faced some backlash within China as well, where it was criticised for being insensitive (Buckley, 2021).

A more active approach on the part of the CPC to messaging, including the use of global platforms, has created new tensions between domestic and external propaganda. The use of social media by traditional Chinese state media organisations—at home and abroad—also poses new challenges when it comes to assessing Chinese messaging, as it has collapsed the traditional hierarchies that were seen as determining the legitimacy or authoritativeness of the information coming out of China. If in the past, the *People’s Daily* (*Renmin Ribao*) or the *PLA Daily* (*Jiefangjun Bao*), the military’s official paper, were regarded as conveying official viewpoints; how a tweet or Weibo post by them, or by their English-language platforms, might be interpreted, is less clear. But what is certain is that social media has emerged as an important information battleground and merits being studied as closely as traditional media outlets that are usually given primacy in studies of China’s messaging.



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