

U.S. ADVISORY COMMISSION ON PUBLIC DIPLOMACY

Minutes and Transcript

Quarterly Public Meeting on Understanding the PRC's Approach to Public Diplomacy

Thursday, January 16, 2025, 11:00 a.m. – 12:30 p.m. ET

U.S. Capitol Visitor Center, First St SE, Washington, DC, Room SVC-203

COMMISSION MEMBERS (Online):

TH Sim Farar, Chair

TH William J. Hybl, Vice-Chair

COMMISSION STAFF MEMBERS (Present):

Ms. Sarah Arkin, Executive Director

Mr. Dan Langenkamp, Senior Advisor

Ms. Kristy Zamar, Program Assistant

MINUTES:

The U.S. Advisory Commission on Public Diplomacy held a public meeting from 11:00 a.m. – 12:30 p.m. on Thursday, January 16, 2025, to present the [2024 Comprehensive Annual Report on Public Diplomacy & International Broadcasting](#) and discuss the People's Republic of China's approach to public diplomacy and utilizing the information space to advance PRC objectives.

A distinguished panel of experts reflected on China's extensive use of strategic communications, purchasing and influencing media outlets throughout the world, particularly in Latin America, and its whole of government approach to reaching foreign publics. Panelists included Samantha Custer, Director, [AidData's](#) Policy Analysis Unit (PAU) at William & Mary's Global Research Institute; Sarah Cook, Independent researcher and consultant, Author of the [UnderReported China](#) newsletter; and Igor Patrick, Journalist and author of [Hearts & Minds, Votes & Contracts: China's State Media in Latin America](#).

ACPD Executive Director Sarah Arkin opened and moderated the session, Chairman Sim Farar provided introductory remarks, and Sarah Arkin closed the meeting. The speakers took questions from the audience, as detailed in the transcript below.

AUDIENCE:

Approximately 30 people attended in person, and more than 120 people logged on to the Zoom platform to view the event virtually, including:

- PD practitioners and PD leadership from the Department of State, USAGM, and other agencies;
- Members of the foreign affairs and PD think tank communities;
- Academics in communications, foreign affairs, and other fields;
- Congressional staff members;

- Current and retired USIA and State PD officers.
- Members of the international diplomatic corps; and
- Members of the public.

Note: The following transcript has been edited for length and clarity.

Sarah Arkin: Good morning, everyone, and thank you to everyone who braved both the cold weather and chaos of Congress to come in person. We’re also very happy to have so many people join us online.

This meeting is technically our belated fourth quarter meeting – but last quarter was a little hectic. This end of year (/beginning of year) meeting is traditionally where we roll our Annual Report, which I’m pleased to be able to do today. We have framed this year’s annual report on U.S. public diplomacy in the context of great power competition. Everyone in this room and online knows full well that great power competition goes far beyond military capabilities or economic reach. Indeed, throughout government, academia or the think tank world, there is a recognition that the information space – and countries’ and non-state actors’ ability to directly fight for hearts and minds in the palm of peoples’ hands – is a critical battlefield.

The recommendations in this year’s reports all come in this context. So rather than having a discussion explicitly about those recommendations – which we may do in the future – we thought it would be most useful to help paint a fuller picture of what the United States – and specifically our public diplomacy efforts – are up against. How our competitors and adversaries execute their public diplomacy efforts. Understanding how they are fighting this battle to set the narrative and project their own interests.

I’m thrilled that we have a group of panelists who are looking at this broad question from different angles. I will introduce each panelist before their presentation.

Please note that the panelists will present consecutively, followed by a moderated question and answer session.

A video recording and full written transcript of this quarterly meeting will be made available shortly on the ACPD website.

So, with that, let me turn it over to ACPD Chairman Sim Farar. Sim is joining us from L.A. where he is dealing with the devastating fallout from the wildfires. Our hearts are with the entire community out there.

Sim Farar: Thank you, Sarah, very much.

With my distinguished colleague from the Commission, Vice Chairman **Bill Hybl**, I am pleased to welcome you to this quarterly meeting. Thank you, Sarah, for acknowledging the devastation here in Los Angeles. It is terrible for a lot of people.

A very warm welcome to our audiences in person and online around the world, and a special thank you to our distinguished panelists for sharing their expertise with us. I’m sorry that I can’t be with you today, but as Sarah indicated, we’re dealing with quite a lot here in L.A.

Today, we’re going to delve into how China approaches public diplomacy. While it’s difficult to track exactly how much China spends on public diplomacy – or how much it spends on anything really – we do know that most experts believe that China spends billions of dollars on public diplomacy efforts including media operations – its own state-owned media, international communication centers and collaborations with foreign outlets overseas, educational exchanges, journalist “training” tours, and directly engaging with state and local officials.

I hope our panelists can help illuminate how integral public diplomacy – directly engaging with people across the world, particularly in this media-saturated environment – is to China’s overall foreign policy agenda. We’re hopeful this will provide good context and framing for Congress as it thinks about our own public diplomacy budget and operations.

Once again, thank you for joining us today.

Sarah, back over to you.

Sarah Arkin: Thank you, Sim. I'm going to turn it right over to Samantha Custer, who is the Director of the Policy Analysis Unit at AidData at William and Mary's Global Research Institute.

Samantha Custer: Thank you very much for the kind introduction, Sarah, and thanks to all of you for braving the enhanced security procedures to come out today. Let me begin with the bottom line up front. I want to use my brief remarks to really underscore three critical pieces of strategic context for you about China's approach to public diplomacy.

So first, I want to emphasize, there is a strategic imperative that informs China's public diplomacy, and that is the desire to win the narrative. Secondly, China has the financial means and the political will to employ a formidable public diplomacy and broadcasting toolkit to wage this narrative competition. Third...and I think this is important about its public diplomacy approach... China seeks synergies between public diplomacy, information, influence, and economic cooperation as a force multiplier to amplify the reach and impact of its narratives. It does not view these as separate, isolated tools.

So let me begin first with this strategic imperative. We live in a world of contested narratives.

China seeks synergies between public diplomacy, information, influence, and economic cooperation as a force multiplier to amplify the reach and impact of its narratives. It does not view these as separate.

–Samantha Custer

Is China using economic power to coerce countries to do things that are not in their interests? Or is China working towards their mutual benefit?

Is the U.S. promoting a free, open, secure, and prosperous world? Or is it a neocolonial bully curbing the rise of other nations in a bid to maintain its dominance?

Chinese and U.S. leaders both have their own answers to these questions that are preferred. But these are more than empty words. These are narratives that jockey for position, with traditional and social media, in public and private discourse, between great powers and critically within third countries.

We are in an era of intensified great power competition and geopolitical competition. In this environment, economic and military might is insufficient for a great power—be that China or the United States—to get the outcomes it wants in the absence of cooperation with other countries.

So really, then, we're talking about a target audience of interest that is not limited to the advanced economies or historical military allies, but it is an expanded set of low- and middle-income countries. These players have become more and more important because they have more options than ever before to guard their strategic autonomy and to navigate great power competition by playing both sides in pursuit of the best possible deals.

Chinese leaders have internalized this critical lesson. For them, winning the narrative is not merely about the warm and fuzzies of reputational management. This about accumulating invaluable currency with which to weaken rivals, win friends and allies and shore up power at home.

Beijing has multiple objectives for this narrative competition. So first, let's look at this economically. If foreign citizens and leaders admire the People's Republic of China's economic success, and they believe that Beijing is a beneficial partner for their country's development, this generates demand -- demand to buy, trade, and work with China. It also critically allows

for willing partners to supply critical resources, raw materials, energy, and transportation routes to fuel China's economy.

There's also a geopolitical dimension to this. Beijing's ability to inform co-opt and control narratives allows it to win support for positions in the United Nations and other regional fora. It allows China to inoculate the Chinese Communist Party against criticism externally that could foment domestic dissent. And it allows China to project strength to check the influence of rivals like the United States.

And then security. We can't forget that as well. If you're China, it's easier to justify your assertive maritime and territorial claims if others accept your actions as legitimate. Or, at minimum, if they lack the will to mount a compelling alternative narrative or objection. And so this really is about bringing other countries along to seeing China as a protector rather than a threat to their national interests and their sovereignty.

Okay, so let's talk about the tools. What's in this formidable toolkit that I talked about?

There is arguably not a single country on earth that is not reached by the PRC's state-run media. We're talking about Xinhua, People's Daily, China News Service, China Daily, and many more that disseminate customized content in both official and popular languages for target countries all over the world. China invests in radio and television capabilities. And we're talking everything from shortwave transmitters in China, Cuba, and Mali to television channels that are broadcasted by satellite networks to every country in the world.

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But I would argue that actually more consequential than the state-run media are Beijing's attempts to borrow local credibility and that is through partnerships with media outlets and journalists in other countries. I'll give you some examples. So as of 2022... sorry as of 2022, Beijing had brokered over 400 content-sharing partnerships with local media outlets. And this allows these outlets to print, share, or co-create Chinese state-run media content. What's interesting about these content sharing partnerships is that they directly infuse domestic media coverage with minimal intermediation. So in practice, this means that citizens who are consuming local news may be oblivious to the fact that they are effectively consuming Chinese Communist Party (CCP) propaganda.

Journalist exchange programs also build rapport with individual journalists and the hope that they will write, view China more favorably, write more positive coverage or at minimum censor criticism.

There are also other tools like access to officials, credentials, and visas to cover important events, advertising revenue and sponsored content. And all of these effectively serve as levers of control over the decisions that local media outlets make about the stories they choose to cover and how they cover them.

Beijing, of course, uses social media platforms, works with local influencers to spread pro-China content, aimed at younger tech-savvy audiences.

And then, of course, as was said at the start, China also uses people-to-people diplomacy, very personalized connections, to build relationships between Chinese people and foreign publics. I'll give you a couple of examples of this.

As of 2022 there were over 400 Confucius Institutes and classrooms overseas that promote Chinese language and culture. That's nearly one or more Confucius Institutes in every country in the world. Europe and Asia have most of these, but Africa is an increasing area of interest. It has the third largest share of these institutions.

Before the pandemic Beijing positioned China as a premier study abroad destination. And they do this in tandem with Confucius Institutes that allow them to associate students with this idea of study abroad opportunities, get access to scholarships, even provide language training.

Also important, and perhaps not commonly looked at, is the fact that China also provides vocational training. It's not just about students anymore. It's about professionals and elites that want to study in China. And this effectively excellent example of this are Luban workshops which socialize demand for Chinese technology standards and training.

Finally, I want to talk about China's approach to public diplomacy as a force multiplier. China is very intentional and systematic in exploiting synergies between public diplomacy, information influence operations, and economic cooperation. And it does this because it recognizes this is a great bang for your buck. This is a way to reinforce and amplify narratives.

What are some of these narratives that they're interested in promoting? So they're trying to redefine international norms on human rights emphasizing collective over individual rights, emphasizing economic over political rights. It raises up China's development model as one to which other countries can aspire and cements its status as a non-colonial power. It promotes China as a good neighbor and a responsible global leader that's interested in win-win solutions and working together as part of a community of common destiny. These are refrains that you hear all time and time again in China's state-run media in its senior leader communications. You hear this reinforced in its education and exchange programs. These are critical.

China is very intentional and systematic in exploiting synergies between public diplomacy, information influence operations, and economic cooperation. --Samantha Custer

The last thing I want to highlight is the economic connection, because China's economic importance is the most often cited reason why leaders in low- and middle-income countries say they view Beijing favorably, and as having influence over their priorities. This subjective perception is actually based on objective facts. You think about the fact that China is now the largest financier of overseas development projects. It's the largest official creditor in the world. It's the number one trading partner for 70% of the world's countries.

Beijing uses public diplomacy and information influence operations to amplify this narrative. It ensures its economic assistance is highly publicized by state run media. It ensures that its Confucius Institutes and Classrooms reinforce the appeal of learning Mandarin and studying in China as a gateway for economic opportunity.

But of course, even as much as I'm lauding the fact that these tools can work together, they can also work at cross purposes. And that's very much true for China. I'll give a couple of examples of this, and then looking forward to the next panelist. The first is Beijing's assertiveness of its maritime claims in the South China Sea. It doesn't matter how much public diplomacy you have or how good it is. This does not win China very many friends.

There's a strong association in people's minds between China and the Belt and Road initiative, and that's been a double-edged sword, because now it makes China vulnerable to narratives about encouraging irresponsible borrowing, negative Environment, Social, and Governance (ESG) impacts from these projects and worsening corruption.

And then, of course, as I imagine, Igor and Sarah might talk about Beijing's heavy handedness in curbing the independence of journalists has generated both attention and pushback.

So I hope that these three strategic context points are good food for thought. I look forward to hearing more from Sarah and Igor and your discussion to really understand how these tools operate in different communities and how this is shaping global narratives. Thank you.

Sarah Arkin: Thank you, Samantha. That was a really useful chapeau for the way that we need to be looking at all of these angles. I am now going to turn it over to Sarah Cook, who is an independent researcher and consultant, and she is the author of the Under Reported China newsletter.

Sarah Cook: Great, thank you. And I'm so glad I was able to join virtually. Samantha covered a lot of the points I'd been planning to make, but it's also very interesting to hear how the two different perspectives intersect.

So what I was planning to look at to address today is how the Chinese Government seeks to influence foreign audiences and media ecosystems. And this is both via what we might consider traditional public diplomacy, but also other, you might say, sharper tactics and I would like to highlight three trends in particular. For my remarks, I'm an independent researcher. As many of you know, I worked at Freedom House for a very long time, and I led a project called Beijing's Global Media Influence that looked at this particular phenomenon in 30 countries around the world across 6 regions, and I'll be drawing on some of those in-depth case studies as well as research I've conducted since then.

[T]he Chinese Communist Party has actively accelerated its multibillion-dollar campaign to shape public opinion. –Sarah Cook

I think when we look at Chinese government public diplomacy, it is really important to consider the starting point being the political situation within China where the Chinese Communist Party exerts tight political and social control, and where over the past decade, repression has intensified against a widening set of targets from an already high level. It's within that context that we see a more aggressive effort by the regime abroad, both using softer and sharper tactics. And so we do face a situation, as Samantha was saying, where today the second largest economy is ruled by one of the globe's most authoritarian regimes and over the past decade or two the Chinese Communist Party has actively accelerated its multibillion dollar campaign to shape public opinion and this is both for a combination, as Samantha mentioned, of trying to secure its foreign policy priorities abroad. But ultimately, when you really look at the Chinese Communist Party and some of the internal speeches and the like, so much of this comes back to the domestic situation that the Chinese Communist Party wants to make the world safe for the Chinese Communist party.

But I think one of the things that we've seen is also that you have global audiences that are more sophisticated. So when they see content coming from Chinese state media, a lot of people do understand who's behind this, and they're more skeptical of it. And that's one of the things driving a turn to more sophisticated, more hidden, more covert and more coercive tactics.

Now, as Samantha mentioned, this is a global phenomenon. In the research that Freedom House did we actually provided scores to countries, and we were really able to compare which countries were facing the highest and widest set of media influence efforts coming from Beijing. Not surprisingly, Taiwan, the United States, and the United Kingdom were at the top of the list.

But as you start to move down we also saw pretty multifaceted efforts across multiple sectors of the media ecosystem in countries like Nigeria, Spain, Kenya, the Philippines, and Argentina. And as Samantha mentioned, when you look at this in terms of media markets globally, really, no market is too small in terms of the languages that are just spoken, sometimes by a relatively few number of people and the Chinese state media and diplomats and other entities are creating content in these languages. But even in countries where the overall influence wasn't that strong, you still saw elements of the broader toolbox: state media content inserts, censorship pressures from Chinese diplomats, or infrastructure controlled by Chinese companies with ties to the Communist party. And so when, we think about Chinese public diplomacy, it really is falling within a much wider set of tools, and for the Freedom House project, and in my own work, otherwise I like to think of it as falling into five different buckets. One bucket is the propaganda.

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That's a promotion of narratives often labeled, but often obscured. So that's where you get into the more covert element even when we're just talking about straight up, content dissemination. But then you get into the disinformation space, and that's a combination of promoting outright falsehoods and conspiracy theories as well as using fake accounts and more manipulative tactics on social media to share those falsehoods, but also to engage in various different actions that end up sowing discord domestically within foreign countries.

Then you get to the censorship and intimidation and the various tactics for information suppression which is very much the flip side of the coin.

A fourth bucket you can think about gets into the content infrastructure. So there are Chinese companies, whether it's social media applications or digital television companies in places like Africa that have close ties to the Chinese Communist Party, are now the gatekeepers in controlling what information is disseminated to local audiences.

But we're also increasingly seeing a proactive effort to send out negative messaging, trying to smear reputations, discredit critics or competitors, and sow discord. And the U.S. is a prime target... -- Sarah Cook

And lastly, the CCP's efforts to promote its own model of information control, and media governance through trainings to journalists, but also to officials in other countries. And when we look at the propaganda dimension, and we look at some of the narratives being promoted, there is a lot of what Samantha mentioned. You know how wonderful Chinese governance is, Chinese development model, encouraging openness to Chinese investment, conflating China and the Chinese Communist Party, raising the profile of Chinese Communist Party leaders. But we're also increasingly seeing a proactive effort to send out negative messaging, trying to smear reputations, discredit critics or competitors, and sow discord. And the U.S. is a prime target to be honest. If you look at some of the state media content and other dissemination information disseminated to different parts of the world by Chinese state media. But there's also examples of individual politicians or political candidates in places like Canada, Taiwan, and France being targeted, as well as some of the persecuted communities that you might expect, like Uighurs, or Tibetans, or Hong Kongers, or Falun Gong practitioners.

[W]e really cannot underestimate the role and importance of traditional media. [In] 30 countries, we counted 130 news outlets that had aired Chinese state produced content...--Sarah Cook

And in my last bit of time I just wanted to highlight three trends that emerged from both our research and subsequent observations that I've made. One is, I think, to Samantha's point we really cannot underestimate the role and importance of traditional media. And this isn't again so much in terms of CGTN being on TV, and whether someone's going to flip to that channel.

But this element of Beijing being so effective at getting Beijing backed content into the mainstream media in other countries. And we looked at 30 countries. But just in those 30 countries we counted 130 news outlets that had aired Chinese state produced content either from Chinese diplomats or state media, or a provincial government, or some other content.

And that included television and radio. And I think when we look around the world, especially in countries or regions with lower Internet penetration, or for older or more rural populations this is still a key avenue for information consumption. Now, in a lot of cases that content was labeled. But in many cases it was not, and in some cases the connection to the back to the party state was deliberately obscured.

I think the second phenomenon is this element of the use of covert tactics and disinformation campaigns on social media. And this can be the fake accounts, and the manipulation can take multiple forms. One is simply amplifying, artificially amplifying posts by Chinese diplomats, for example, which has occurred in dozens of countries.

But then you also get these more targeted disinformation campaigns where fake social media accounts are used to spread falsehood or sow confusion, not only regarding China or human rights violations in China, but also domestic politics. And there's a number of examples. Of course, Taiwan has been at the forefront of multiple campaigns like this to try to influence the outcome of its elections. But we've seen examples in the U.S. and Canada and Australia and the Philippines.

And if people would like more details on how some of these tactics work, I'm happy to address that. We do see a rise in the use of AI, for example, not only for generating memes and things like that, but actually for altering audio and video content which can be, I think, potentially more problematic.

And then the last trend, I think that is really important is the coercive side of this the use of intimidation and information suppression, tactics, as well as something that Samantha hinted at, which is the use of economic leverage and other relationships, vis-a-vis, powerful elites, either in the media or in the political sphere, to get them to take action, to suppress certain coverage or silence critical voices, and in the Freedom house study, out of 30 countries, we found examples of this occurring in 24.

So again, this is a global phenomenon. In about half of the countries, it was Chinese diplomats or other government representatives that took actions to intimidate, harass, or pressure journalists or commentators in response to their coverage. But notably it was actually even more countries -- in 17 of the countries where it was local officials or media executives outside China, often ones with some kind of political or economic interest related to China, who actually tried to suppress the critical reporting.

And I think it's also notable, and this is something we've seen further accelerate in the last couple of years is the role of the Hong Kong government and even also companies such as

Huawei, in joining the fray in issuing legal threats based on the national security law, bounties for exile activists, and threatening defamation suits.

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I think one other phenomenon that's come up, and I think, relates to this element of the evolution towards even murkier tactics is the emergence of and proliferation of anonymous threats and questionable impersonations, and these are really difficult to trace. But, for example, we've seen a rise in cyber bullying of female journalists by trolls online. But we've also, just in the last year or two, seen a number of examples of fake calls, threats of mass shootings, or bombings to venues, or to groups that were going to be hosting some event that the Chinese Government didn't like. This happened for the World Uighur Congress at their local meeting, it happened to a series of theaters in Taiwan that were airing films on organ transplant abuses.

It's happened at theaters in the United States and elsewhere, who are hosting performances by the Shen Yun Performing Arts Company. But there's even more insidious ones, where you start to see examples of impersonations of people who are critical of the Chinese government and someone impersonating them to make it seem like they put in a bomb threat. And there was one notable example of that actually, in the Netherlands, of a former foreign correspondent who'd actually done a lot of work on Uighur issues and interviewing dissidents in the Netherlands. And somebody actually did fake hotel bookings and issued fake bomb threats in her name. And then the Chinese Embassy reported it to the police, and she became a suspect. Ultimately, they saw through the tactics, but they were never able to actually find who was behind this.

But I think that that speaks to this combination of some of the murkiness of the tactics when you go from media influence and media suppression, or public diplomacy, or what the role of the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs is, into things that roll over more into transnational repression. And so I think to that point, it's really vital to be cognizant of the fact that the

Chinese regime, whether it's through its diplomats or proxies, or even security forces within China have no qualms about combining these different tactics to achieve strategic goals.

So, you really can't look at Chinese public diplomacy in isolation and think of it as being strictly in the realm of narrative promotion and relationship building because they will happily use funds that are provided to traditional media or economic interests by owners unrelated to the media sector to try to suppress critical reports. There was an example in Kenya of a local newspaper doing an investigative report about a Chinese State-owned Enterprise building a railroad and abuses that happened there. What happened? The company threatened the lawsuit, but then it was the Chinese Embassy that actually ended up canceling ads and paid advertorials with that newspaper when they refused to retract the story.

And you also see various other examples of offline political influence and agents trying to be used to silence voices. There was a multi-layered campaign of an information laundering campaign in the U.S. which involved actually a proxy of the PRC managing to trick a U.S. film producer into creating content of a fake protest against U.S. legislation on Uighurs, and then that becoming part of a multi-platform disinformation campaign to undermine U.S. policy debates about that. The DOJ recently - there were two agents convicted in the United States of attempting to bribe a purported IRS official and manipulate the Whistleblower program to revoke the nonprofit status of Shen Yun Performing Arts to the Falun Gong community.

[T]here were two agents convicted in the United States of attempting to bribe a purported IRS official and manipulate the Whistleblower program to revoke the nonprofit status of Shen Yun Performing Arts to the Falun Gong community. —Sarah Cook

And so I think when we look at the U.S. response, whether it's within the United States or when we're considering U.S. foreign policy partnerships, we really need to take what Samantha referred to as the synergy on the Chinese Communist Party side into consideration, and think about, how do we not only respond in terms of narratives but what actions can be taken to build resilience to these sharper tactics and tools. Thank you.

Sarah Arkin: Thank you, Sarah, and hopefully, we'll get into some of that in the Q&A and the moderated discussion. You've laid out a much more detailed picture of how the CCP approaches media and narratives. And now I'd like to turn it over to Igor Patrick, who literally wrote the book on Chinese media Influence in Latin America, and really drilled down to a regional specific look at some of what Samantha and Sarah have been talking about.

Igor Patrick: Thank you very much, Sarah. Thank you, everyone, for coming. It's really nice to have the opportunity to talk about this. This is the result of four years of research. And when you have other people interested in what you've been doing so obsessively for so many years, it's always nice. So I guess both Samantha and Sarah explained how this strategy works, and I'll try to come up with some more concrete examples on how this plays out in Latin America. That was the focus of my research. But first I'd like to tell you how I started investigating this case.

So I've been covering China, this is going to be my 11th year covering China affairs, and in 2019 I went to Beijing Dashwa, the Peking University for my first master's in China, in China studies, and we all know what happened in 2020. I was traveling for my winter break, got locked outside of China, went back to Brazil, and suddenly I was unemployed. For the first time of my life I was like no hope whatsoever. And then I saw this TV channel in Brazil called Band. This is like the third biggest news channel in Brazil. It reaches about like 150 to 180 million people every day. It's free TV. They had a new segment under newscast primetime show called Mundo China, or “China's World.”

And I was like, wow, that's great, that aligns perfectly with my CV and my experience, and I followed them on Twitter, and I reached out to send my CV and apply for a job there. I was quite surprised to see that the person who replied me had a handle @cctv.com, which is the state media in China. And I was like, well, that's a bit weird, like I'm applying for a job in a very well-known commercial TV station in Brazil and someone from CCTV is replying to me. And then I noticed that it was a three-month-old program that was fully produced and sponsored by CCTV, the State TV station in China, in Portuguese for Brazilian audiences. And I was like, well this is a very interesting case, because, I've been doing this for so many years, and even in my case, I couldn't recognize it was Chinese state media propaganda.

So I started like investigating this, first for my dissertation at Beida. So, what I did was to try to measure on how effective that program was in trying to change perceptions of people in Brazil about China and what I noticed is that when people came across with the content and they knew it was produced by China they would show some skepticism about the content. But the problem is, most people couldn't recognize what was clearly from China and what was from Band, this commercial TV station. One of the reasons why is because it's all designed to look [like] the same thing, just one single product. They even have their own local journalists, Band journalists to participate in this new segment. And it's not a five minute thing. It's like 15 to 20 minutes every day on primetime TV.

And then, as I started investigating, I noticed that, these strategies way broader and very complex, and it varies, depending on which country they are trying to achieve. And one of the reasons why this happens. There is this researcher. He's from Argentina, but he's a professor at the London School of Economics. He tries to analyze how effective this is as well, and I remember there is a paper he published a few years ago, where he showed Spanish and Chinese media content to people in Argentina, Mexico, and Colombia and some of them would display some discomfort with the accent some Chinese reporters would use. Others

would say that they use the same neutral Spanish accent that some commercial TV stations here in the U.S. use when broadcasting content for Latin America. And they thought it was a bit patronizing.

So they started changing the strategy depending on the country they wanted to reach. So they first of all, they have influencers, and I know you mentioned some local influencers. But what got me really surprised is that they are trying to promote their own bilingual journalists as influencers, and they have different pages with different content depending on the country. So, for example, there is one woman in Peru. She's Chinese, of course, all of them are, but she studied many years in Peru, so she can speak Spanish with a Peruvian accent, and using Peruvian slangs in Brazil. Same thing with another one; I was quite surprised because that girl has 1.3 million followers on Facebook and no one ever heard about her. And then I noticed her doing collabs with famous Brazilian youtubers on some stuff, like Chinese cuisine, for example, or like, come with me to see the Pandas in Chengdu.

But then, from time to time, in the middle of all this very naive content you have, “Oh, is there really a genocide in Xinjiang,” you know, in the middle of like this content. And I noticed this is not something happening only in Latin America. In Nigeria, for example, you have this Chinese journalist that, dressed up with local Nigerian clothing, and tries to speak with the local language as well.

[F]rom time to time, in the middle of all this very naive content you have, “Oh, is there really a genocide in Xinjiang?” ... [T]his is not something happening only in Latin America.—Igor Patrick

So it was very clever, and I was surprised, because only I started investigating this, I noticed that it wasn't something concentrated to just a few media outlets. It's across the board, regardless of the ideology, the political inclination of the media outlet.

So I guess the first question that comes to everyone's mind is: is this effective? And initially, I thought it wasn't. But then I noticed that people tend to rely on the newspaper, the TV station that they use to get their news every day right. And the content is specifically designed to confuse people so they wouldn't be able to distinguish what is propaganda and what is independent journalism. And even when it's propaganda, I'm just going to read you some very briefly the results of this research conducted by some researchers at Harvard, Yao, and a Dutch university that I simply cannot pronounce the name.

[T]he content is specifically designed to confuse people, so they wouldn't be able to distinguish what is propaganda and what is independent journalism. —Igor Patrick

So they basically showed 6,276 individuals from 19 countries, including many in Latin America, but also in developed countries like Singapore and Canada. About 20,000 CGTN videos. For those who are not familiar is the main state media channel for international audiences and compared those with about a thousand videos published by Share America – the State Department website, and [videos from] Voice of America.

And surprisingly they came up with the following results. Exposure to messages from Chinese state media that commend the high performance of the Chinese Government can effectively generate support for China's economic and political motto. Considering the limited reach of Chinese state media, exposure to new information about China is more likely to shift international public opinions towards Chinese beliefs and values than information about the United States.

When facing conflicting messages from democratic and autocratic countries, the public tends to favor the autocratic model state media and authoritarian regimes tend to be more successful in developing countries. And Chinese state media offer a fresh perspective on China, and are thus particularly effective in boosting approval for the Chinese Government, even though they fall short in convincing people of its democratic nature.

This is something that happens not only in Africa and Latin America, but also in places where they conducted the same research in Canada, in Singapore, even in the U.K., in Latin America, specifically, specifically, and very briefly, I'll mention some cases I was able to get for the book.

I think they noticed that first of all, media in Latin America is very concentrated. It's in the hands of just a few people. These people are usually agribusiness elites, so they have a clear interest in using their media channels as like a business card to get deals for the agribusiness sections of their companies, their conglomerates. So they come up with the Chinese, they say, oh, look like I love China. I even have a newspaper that publishes Chinese content every day.

And it's interesting how clever they are in trying to get a sense of the political moment in every country, and how to do this. So in Argentina, for example, they exploited, when Argentina defaulted on their debt like a few years ago, I think, 2009.

A few months later Xi Jinping went to Argentina to cite a strategic partnership, and they basically bailed out the Argentine Government at that time, and they started this partnership by signing a contract with a left-leaning newspaper that used to support the current president at the time, Kristina Kirchner. Once Christina Kirchner left power, and then Mauricio Macri, a right-wing president, was elected, the right-wing newspapers started to lose their audience because people would go to their website to get the latest news from the opposition.

They reach out to the right-wing newspapers as well. So okay, we know that you're losing revenue. We know that you're losing your audience, and we're here to help you out. So they sign a contract sometime. It's paid. Sometimes it's free, but they are able to establish this bridge between their content to like traditional media. In Colombia there is this network called the Alianza Informativa, Latin Americana, or All. And there is a U.S. member to this alliance as well. CBS is part of this alliance, and they are basically a network that has a partnership with the Chinese state media, and through them they are able to broadcast Chinese content to 28 countries in Latin America.

Most of them try to make it clear to the audience that this is coming from CCTV. Or like Chinese media in general. Sometimes it's quite perceptible because of the accent when they speak Spanish, but, very often they don't. In Mexico - that was a very interesting case, because just a few days before I arrived from my field research in 2023, the second biggest newspaper in Mexico got a tip from Human Rights watch here in DC: That the Mexican Ambassador to the UN. Mission in Geneva was visiting Xinjiang, and she didn't let anyone know in Mexico City.

So they managed to get this information because the Cuban ambassador to the UN was also on this trip, and he posted a photo on his personal profile on Twitter. So [the newspaper] sent [the ambassador] an email. [The reporter] was writing the news; she put it on the newspaper. And this newspaper - they have a partnership with people's daily. They pay them about \$10,000 per page. They publish every week, and they also have a specific section. When you click on world news on this website, there is a specific banner just for People's Daily News there, and the editors say that [the reporter] is not authorized to even move that banner out of the website to another part of the website. So she wrote the news and the newspaper was about to be printed when she gets a call from the owner of the newspaper, a Mexican national. And he [said]: What are you doing? Why are you publishing this? And she [said]: well, it's news; a Mexican ambassador went to a region where there are multiple denouncements of human rights violations, and she didn't let anyone know, not even people here at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in Mexico City. And [the editor said], “Look, this [PRC-sponsored] page is paying for your salary. It's paying for the salary of many journalists in this newsroom. No one cares about random Muslims in West China. Please take that out.”

And [the editor said], “Look, this [PRC-sponsored] page is paying for your salary. It's paying for the salary of many journalists in this newsroom. No one cares about random Muslims in West China. Please take that out.” –Igor Patrick

I don't know why, and I don't know how, but she was able to break the news eventually. But that shows how these newspapers can be increasingly dependent on this money. In Brazil we have, many commercial newspapers that have this kind of partnership as well. And I was only able to discover about this because of FARA, the Foreign Agent Registration Act [in the United States] because China Daily pays these newspapers in Latin America through their headquarters here in the U.S. And through their budget and all the spreadsheets they submitted for FARA, I was able to find this contract. So this is not very clear.

Sarah Arkin: Fascinating. You could probably keep going and giving us so many more detailed examples which I hope we will get to. But I know that we have more than 100 people online, and we have a number of people in the audience. So I'd like to open this up to a debate and to questions. And I'm going to take the moderator's prerogative and do the first one. All of you have been looking at this issue set in such detail for such a long time, and I'm curious in just a couple of minutes, because I do want to be able to get to audience questions. If you can offer some examples that you see in implications for the United States tools that we have on this front. This panel has not yet gone into what we would consider our traditional public diplomacy tools, including exchanges and English language and things like that. And we could pivot that way. But I'm curious as we're talking about the information space and this bigger narrative building approach to public diplomacy that China takes, areas where you see the tools we have in this space, and how those compare and how they've been utilized. Let's start with you, Samantha.

Samatha Custer: Sure, thank you so much. It's the right question to be asking, I think. A few things kind of come to mind when you pose that. I liked what Sarah said about that there's an affirmative aspect or a positive aspect to China's messaging and a negative, or, you know, a detracting aspect to that. In the U.S. context, I think you know, you look at a lot of the narratives that the U.S. is trying to promote around should countries be working so closely with China. There's been an emphasis on the Indo-Pacific Strategy initiative. Various narratives that are seen as competing or countering China. But one of the common refrains and weaknesses that we see, I think, in U.S. public diplomacy is the lack of a clear and compelling value proposition for what the U.S. can offer as a partner. So it's not enough to say, oh, don't work with China. Well, okay, if I don't work with China, well, what is the U.S. prepared to

offer? There's a lack of clarity on that. I think secondly, what I talked about in terms of the synergy of the tools that China uses; I don't think you see that same thing in the context of the U.S. I think we tend to view people to people diplomacy as kind of separate from informational broadcasting, separate from how we think about our economic toolkit, various other things. And considering how small a budget we actually allocate to these kinds of activities, it's a missed opportunity to get more from these critical tools by making them play together in the same way. So those are some of the things that immediately come to mind. But I'd love to hear from Sarah and Igor as well.

Sarah Arkin: Igor, over to you, and then we'll head over to Sarah.

Igor Patrick: Well, I'm not an expert in U.S. Public diplomacy strategies. There is a list here of 5 stories. I'll read out the headlines for you about these kinds of content sharing agreements, the kind of stories they published in a Mexican newspaper. And again, this was not labeled as state media content. So this is between 2021 to 2023. The first one was published on July 24, 2023. The headline is: “Why does the United States consistently accuse China of entrapping the U.S?”

And then we have one published in August 2023: “Who will have the last laugh, China or the U.S.? The answer can be found in the art of war.” And then we have: “The American nightmare amidst the tragedy of Latin American immigrants.” This is a documentary they provided for this newspaper. Then we have one that is very clearly propaganda, “The relentless quest for the people's happiness is a core principle of the Communist party of China.”

These are just four examples of stories published through the main newspaper in Mexico, El Universal without a clear label. This came from China or Xinhua specifically and I mean, if that's the newspaper people use to get news from around the world every day, and they read this, they tend to rely on this information, right? Because they think it comes from their journalists.

And in terms of what the US. has been doing, I know some people say that the way to fight this is investing in more propaganda, and quite the contrary. I think the U.S. used to have a lot of programs to bring journalists from these countries here and have exchange programs in established newsrooms in general. One of the main reasons why they're able to succeed is because people in Latin America don't have the experience that the U.S. has in dealing with China. And quite honestly, for most of us, China, is not the fear that it is for you now. Most people don't see China as a problem like you guys have a strategic competition going on with them. But for us, China is just a source of investment.

So they don't see it as a problem, yet. And if you can bring these journalists here to work with American journalists and see how they reach out to sources, how they do independent China journalism that would be quite helpful. But a few months ago someone from the U.S. Consulate in Sao Paulo met me here in D.C. because they had access to my book, and they

were asking me what they can do. And they were telling me that even bringing journalists to cover the elections and the inauguration, which is something that used to be quite common. They had that budget cut by almost 80%. So, like the last time they were able to bring I think 12 journalists. This time they could only bring 2.

Most people don't see China as a problem like you guys have a strategic competition going on with them. But for us, China is just a source of investment. –Igor Patrick

So this has a clear impact on not only this Chinese narrative spread, but also how people perceive the U.S. as well.

Sarah Arkin: Thank you. Over to you, Sarah. I was nodding because I see someone with a Foreign press center lanyard here.

Sarah Cook: I think there's a lot of things that the Chinese Government does and its influence, as I discussed that the U.S. is not going to do, because they're kind of authoritarian tactics. But there are things in terms of public diplomacy that they do do, and that are really effective. And I think the last, the point that Igor just raised is one of them. And I think when we're looking even at the budget, there's limited resources.

I did actually look through the annual reports. I was seeing the graphics and things like that. A huge chunk is on the people to people exchanges. But look, there is something to think about where these different, the different strategic value in some ways of certain types of exchanges. So, and I didn't look at the precise numbers. But let's say you have, on the one hand, a Fulbright scholarship, which is a really important program, and it brings Americans and scholars. But at the same time, if, on the other hand, you're bringing like 15 or 20 foreign journalists for 2 weeks, or on like a Humphrey scholarship. That just doesn't seem like as good bang for the buck. To be honest, I mean, I think you know, in terms of again, and I may be wrong in terms of my familiarity with the scholarships. But if we're looking at the types of programs that the Chinese Government is providing to journalists. And, as Samantha said, it's not all propaganda. There are vocational dimensions to it, right? And some of these are long. It's not two weeks. It's like a semester. Sometimes it's a whole degree program now that can be really expensive.

But let's say you had even just a U.S. program that brought a hundred journalists a year to the United States, and it was a combination of a semester at a university, and then an internship and working in the media. But as part of that, in addition to the types of units or material related to just the practice of journalism, you incorporated like Igor was saying, some

components related to China. For example, even if it was just having a session where people could meet with Uighurs and Tibetans, or Falun Gong or Chinese dissidents, or Hong Kongers, because in a lot of these countries they don't have opportunity to meet those people, and to hear from those voices directly.

One of the things we did at the end of the Freedom House project, where we had all these local researchers some of them who were journalists is, we did bring a good number to the United States, and we did a session like that. It was really such a valuable opportunity for members of these communities to just speak directly to some of these journalists or researchers from other countries around the world that they might not otherwise be able to access. And to speak specifically like ‘this is what the Chinese Government says about us and this is why it's false.’ And this is the impact, the real, human impact of people actually dying in some cases, or being sent back to China to be tortured because of that, or even just the impact that it might have on someone outside of China.

Something like that doesn't necessarily cost a lot of time per se, or even a lot of money, but I think, could be really strategic. And similarly, if you're thinking about Russia, so you have an opportunity to meet with... I don't know Georgian protesters and Ukrainian activists or things like that. A lot of these communities are active in the United States. And again, it's not so much about counter messaging, but just giving people a chance to hear both sides of the story, because in a lot of cases they wouldn't have that opportunity, and if that can inform their reporting that can be really, really important as well as create this goodwill among the journalistic community.

[I]t's not so much about counter messaging, but just giving people a chance to hear both sides of the story, because in a lot of cases they wouldn't have that opportunity... --Sarah Cook

A couple of other quick thoughts. I mean, again, another kind of mimicking the Chinese Government was what Igor mentioned about high-profile visits by top U.S. Officials. Huge media coverage, right? And you know, maybe it's not the President, maybe it's at the Vice-Presidential level or the Foreign Ministry level, but actually going, and not just when there's a crisis, but just going and creating a partnership. And maybe it's highlighting, either some kind of new MCC compact right?

Sarah Arkin: Just really quickly to clarify that you're not talking about high level visits to China. You're talking...

Sarah Cook: No, no, I'm talking about third countries, like different countries in Africa or Latin America. And then, you know, the Chinese government is great about coming and announcing money they're going to give and half the time that money never actually comes. But they get all these headlines. But [U.S. officials] could go and actually announce, “Here's the MCC compact. Here's what we're doing. Here's what the United States is coming with.” Maybe it's a public private partnership. So, what Samantha was talking about; the [U.S.] value proposition, but also just that sheer diplomatic dimension of giving other countries the feeling that the U.S. feels like this is an actual, important partnership, and high-level people in the U.S. Government are going to be willing to invest the time and effort.

Now we're going to have a Secretary of State who also speaks fluent Spanish so that could be particularly helpful in certain regions of the world, but not only Latin America. And then a couple other very quick thoughts. One on this element, and this was one of the recommendations you all had in your report about having some kind of strategic communications directorate within the NSC. Because I think that is really vitally important. This can't only sit at the State Department, and I do think that it would be helpful to reauthorize funding for something like the Global Engagement Center or parts of the State Department to work on this. I can speak more about what I'm familiar with the work they did and the value there.

[H]aving someone at the level of the [National Security Council] coordinating this and really enabling that kind of full government perspective seems very important. —Sarah Cook

But it's more than that, because there's so much intersection between the international and domestic. And in the U.S. we really do have a problem when it comes to CPP influence efforts here in terms of our own media and political ecosystem and transnational repression. So, having someone at the level of the NSC coordinating this and really enabling that kind of full government perspective seems very important.

And then the last thing I would say maybe more on the messaging side is, I actually feel like it's not always helpful to frame this as great power competition. When you talk to people in other countries, because it's really more in some cases, because that makes it seem like it's just about the interests, right? But in so many ways it's really about the values. And when you talk to journalists and researchers in places like Africa or Latin America, or in parts of Europe and even politicians, they don't necessarily want to be choosing between the U.S. And China. There are different interests and reasons but a lot of Mexicans would get really offended by the anecdote that Igor just sent simply because they value press freedom themselves.

And I think you see that. And so that's something that is really important in some cases for the U.S. to take into consideration when communicating with those audiences when writing OP-eds, which maybe U.S. ambassadors should also do more of. Again, I haven't compared the counts but Chinese ambassadors are very prolific, and that gets back to this question of engagement with traditional media and not just social media. Sorry, that was kind of a long answer, but I pulled together a bunch of ideas based on our other conversation earlier this week. So hopefully, they're helpful.

Sarah Arkin: But a very directed and cogent one so we appreciate it. We have a number of questions online, and a lot of questions here in person. I'm going to start right here, and then I'm going to work on grouping a couple of questions because I'm seeing some themes coming in from online. You can go to the mic, or you can just project. However, you feel comfortable.

Audience/Mark: (audio out) That often includes Taiwan. So it's just looking like a narrative battle across the globe between Taiwan and China. So I'm wondering why is it that? China at every opportunity they get they try to promote that narrative, the one China principle. And also the Indo-Pacific region, as much as China is pouring resource into trying to improve its image, they are not very popular in the industry. I'm just wondering why that is.

Sarah Cook: I'm sorry, Sarah. We couldn't hear the question. Could you just maybe repeat it? And also, who was the person asking it?

Sarah Arkin: I will, and yes. Could you introduce yourself in the mic? And then I'll summarize the question.

Audience/Mark: I'm Mark from United Daily news based in Taiwan. Thank you.

Sarah Arkin: The question was about Taiwan, the narratives that China pushes about Taiwan, and also assessments that in the Indo-Pacific, despite a lot of China's efforts there they're not very perceived very positively. And how reactions to that - both Taiwan and success perceptions of China in its narrative building in the Indo-Pacific. Is that fair? Does anyone want to take that?

Igor Patrick: I can provide some examples on Taiwan. (bell ringing) Is everything okay?

Sarah Arkin: Yes, that's just a vote being called in the Congress. Don't worry about that, I think the Senate is coming into session. No cause for alarm.

Igor Patrick: So, about Taiwan. Except for Paraguay, at least in Latin America we don't have many countries that dispute the one China principle and what I can tell you is what I see very often is whenever there is something big happening around Taiwan. So, for example, when Nancy Pelosi visited Taiwan a few years ago, they were quite active in trying to promote the narrative of one China policy and trying to portray the U.S. as the great power breaching this gentleman's agreement that Taiwan belongs to China. And I would say most people don't even

understand the Taiwan issue in South America. To be honest, most people think Taiwan is an independent country so we don't get that very often in the media unless there is like a military drill, or we have those sort of like high level engagements happening. There was only one occasion that I can remember in Brazilian media recently, and that was during the inauguration of the Paraguayan president, Santiago Pena, where Lula took a photo with William Lai and that became news not only among commercial, independent media legacy media in Brazil, but also state media as well, trying to show how wrong was that without damaging the relationship between China and Brazil.

And so you see this interesting timing dimension where a country in Africa or Latin America, or the Pacific, announces, “Oh, we just brokered a new deal on development cooperation with China.” And kind of quieter on the sidelines... oh, well, they've actually changed their policy with regard to Taiwan. —Samantha Custer

Samantha Custer: It is a great question. On the Taiwan and One China piece. First, this is a great example, I think, of how you have to look at the economic cooperation dimension, alongside the public diplomacy and the information space. Because there's, you know, a lot of the research that I have done has seen kind of the effectiveness of timing. So China makes access to vast amounts of its development financing to countries contingent upon countries accepting the One China policy. And so you see this interesting timing dimension where a country in Africa or Latin America, or the Pacific, announces, oh, we just brokered a new deal on development cooperation with China. And kind of quieter on the sidelines...oh, well, they've actually changed their policy with regard to Taiwan. So that's like a major thing at a strategic level. In terms of some of the examples that Igor was giving, I've run across others in my research where a local media outlet gets a call from the Chinese Embassy saying “Why are you running this Taiwan story...this Taiwan favorable story. We're pouring advertising revenue into you. We're providing sponsored content. You need to squash this.” And so it's these control levers of China, trying to use positive carrots and negative sticks to change the narrative.

For Taiwan, I haven't focused as much on their efforts to proactively shape the narrative. Although, one interesting tidbit on the public diplomacy side is that they have been trying to position themselves as a more friendly alternative option for Chinese language and culture promotion as an alternative to Confucius Institutes. So you see that kind of competition in that space which is interesting.

And then on the Indo-Pacific question. I mean, yeah, a lot of my research actually focuses in that region. I spent time in the Philippines last year doing field research. And it was kind of an interesting country to watch. Because if you look at decades of citizen public opinion polling even though the Philippines has had all of these overtures from China for so long, at best, if you ask Filipinos about whether China is trustworthy as a partner, it barely tipped from negative to neutral. And now, with all of the more recent aggressions in the South China Sea, it's tipped back to negative. Now, this is where there's a difference sometimes between public opinion and that of elites. These public attitudes are also shaped by these stories of maritime incursions as much as it is the sweeteners that China is offering.

Sarah Arkin: Sarah, would you like to add anything?

Sarah Cook: Yeah, I'll just say I think two quick thoughts. One is, I mean, I think Taiwan itself, you know, is at the forefront of being targeted by these multilayered information influence operations, and really to the credit not only of the Taiwanese government, but civil society. I think, in terms of the level of resilience and response that they've been able to create the level of innovation on tracking and detecting, on trying to respond and fact check things on exposing things.

And you've really seen, I think, wider recognition in the democratic world. And people who work and look in this space of how much actually is to learn from Taiwan, and I think you do see some of the Taiwanese civil society, as well as well as again, like government agencies, sharing some of that information and experience. Because again, my research and what I've seen, it really is this incubator effect where the things that they've tried in Taiwan then you start to see popping up in other places around the world, especially when we're talking about more information warfare disinformation stuff. I think just on the broader point about other places is having, the interview by the Taiwanese Foreign Minister published. There were multiple examples of newspaper. There's sometimes the governments that control the newspapers, getting phone calls from the Embassy. There was a case like that in Kuwait, and then actually them taking down the interview, at least in Kuwait that was the case, and replacing it with a statement from the Chinese Embassy.

So I think that is one of those things where the Chinese Government is really trying to constrict the diplomatic voice that Taiwan is able to have in different countries around the world.

Sarah Arkin: We have one specific question that I will answer, which is the name of Igor's book: Hearts & Minds, Votes & Contracts: China's State Media in Latin America.

Igor Patrick: It's available on the Wilson Center's website for free, as a PDF, so if you want to read it, you can get it for free online.

Sarah Arkin: Great, I'm going to group a couple of different themes here and then go back to another specific one. A couple of U.S. Public diplomacy officers in the field are saying part of their challenge is they are bogged down in program management and administration. They

don't have the kind of funds that they can spend in the same way that the Chinese Government can. And also they've seen some pushback that negative messaging about the Chinese doesn't work. Messaging about the Uighur genocide doesn't land even in the very same countries where they're worried about human rights violations, other human rights violations.

So in terms of negative messaging or building anti-China, how have you seen that in a narrative space?

Samantha Custer: So, the question is related to negative messaging that doesn't land. And what are some strategies that could be employed? Okay.

Sarah Arkin: Particularly when, and I'm feeling the bureaucratic frustration of the PD officers in the field about not being able to perhaps do as much as they want because of fund limitations or program limitations, which I don't think you're going to be able to address. But I hear all of you coming in. I'm acknowledging that.

Samantha Custer: I think the challenge with negative messaging is that it runs counter to what people expect of the U.S. in terms of trying to promote this free and fair, prosperous country. If China uses negative messaging, that's perhaps a little bit more to be expected. So there is a double standard there. I will acknowledge this. Secondly, I will say, I think sometimes there's a question of the messenger and the motives that are ascribed to the messenger when you use these negative messages. I referenced the Indo-Pacific Strategy earlier. Even though the U.S. actually went out of its way not to talk about this as an anti-China or China competitive strategy, a lot of people in low middle income countries said: “Oh, this is your anti-China policy. This is because you don't like China.” And there was a motive that was inferred. Now, if you try to highlight more specific negative examples. So I work a lot on looking at development finance and development projects and the narratives around that. The U.S. has tried to figure out how do you talk about, put the spotlight on, the fact that there are these huge problems of corruption and environmental degradation and indebtedness with these projects. Nobody wants to hear this from the U.S. because there's a sense of well, why are you saying this? It's just because you're competing with China. And how do you find the right messenger, I mean, not borrowing local credibility in a manipulative sense, but in identifying who is the most credible, trustworthy to speak to this. Are their actual counterpart country journalists, officials, academics that actually can speak to this? Another piece, is okay...show me the information...the example...the data points...that actually say this isn't just conjecture or subjective fiction. But it's actually evidence-based. So that in my mind is like what I would say...if you, venture into the realm of negative, you just need to make sure that the messenger is credible, and the message is undergirded by sound evidence.

Sarah Arkin: And would it be fair? I'm just picking up on this theme which should come in onto these. How can the United States leverage third party or other messengers, country-specific and context-specific, right, to find your validators?

Igor Patrick: Yeah, there is a problem with Budget. But I think there is also a problem how you frame the narrative. Just to give you an example, Sarah was mentioning, sending high level U.S. officials to those regions and talk to the media and give them press conferences and stuff. The U.S. did this last year in Brazil with Laura Richardson, the commander of U.S., SOUTHCOM and she spoke to a number of newspapers about the risks of Brazil joining the BRI.

Brazil ultimately didn't join the BRI. I don't know if that was a result of Laura Richardson. I doubt it, but anyway. I don't know, did anyone here think for even a second on how effective it would be to send a General to talk to the media, especially considering the history that those countries have with the U.S. supporting military coups there, like in the seventies and the eighties.

So, there are better ways to choose who is going to be the spokesperson, and how to frame the message to be trustworthy and also effective.
—**Igor Patrick**

There are ways, and there are better people to convey these messages, I guess, and Laura Richardson was known in the region for being very hawkish on China in terms that are not always very pleasing for local people to hear, including, oh, they're getting access to resources that we want to have access to. This is not how you communicate with people, and it's going to fall under the same thread that you just mentioned. You're just saying this because you have a competition with China. So there are better ways to choose who is going to be the spokesperson, and how to frame the message to be trustworthy and also effective.

Sarah Arkin: Sarah?

Sarah Cook: I would just say, on both of those points. I agree. One thing I wonder, is kind of is there an element of the U.S. creating whether it's like an embassy like, you know, creating the platform or the opportunity like, it's not so much you're coming and telling people. But maybe you're hosting a panel discussion like this in a country with some of the local experts, maybe some that are more favorable to China. But you know, at least in a lot of the countries there are more and more local journalists and researchers who are following these things and who are concerned not so much because of the U.S. China competition, but because of some of these issues related to press freedom and the like. So that would be one question of creating spaces to foster some of this type of conversation and knowledge sharing. And then I think the other and this gets maybe to other parts of the U.S. is more in terms of the civil society funding and things like that, media development. And not necessarily, I think in some cases it's actually really helpful not to only be like, well, we're going to do a China project, but it's really more about the mainstreaming.

It's mainstreaming. It's like we're going to give a grant for five investigative journalists reports. And this is me. And we would encourage that one of them touch on local Chinese investment because of corruption, because honestly, the stories that get the most attention locally and really shift public perceptions of China are the reports that expose some of this behind the scenes, wrongdoing, whether it has to do with abuses at mines, or just the fact that a Chinese ambassador tried to quash a media report. Or that in Italy there were all of these fake accounts trying to make it sound like Italians were thanking en masse, thanking China for Covid aid, when, in fact, it was, it was actually manipulating a bunch of fake accounts. I think those are things that are worth considering how to be effective that way.

Sim Farar: I just want to say this is a brilliant, insightful meeting. I cannot thank Sarah, Samantha, and Igor enough. You guys were brilliant and great. I want to thank you for being here today. Now back to Sarah Arkin.

Sarah Arkin: Thank you, Sim. Well, actually, with that, we'll just conclude it. (Laughing) I'm going to go here to Louis. And then let's start grouping questions because we're running out of time. So, Luis, and then why don't we take one and two?

Audience/Louis: Okay, thank you so much, Sarah, for the opportunity for doing this. This is amazing. kind of wear different hats. But I'm going to try to, maybe because I, you know, I was a Fulbright, so I know a little bit of the exchange. I'm also a reporter. I did 25 years, doing all those exchanges right, and even working with Freedom House and other institutions here. But my question is more related to my other role. I am one of the board members of the IBAB, the International Broadcasting Advisory Board, who provide some advice and oversee the U.S. Agency for Global Media which actually oversees all the U.S. media, like voice of America, Radio Free Asia Middle East Broadcasting Network and The Open Technology Fund and others. So my question is that's one of the tools of public diplomacy. And on the other side, from Latin America, you remember Voice of America and Voice of America has a prestige. The question is to what extent you feel there is a missed opportunity there, with all those entities that we should maybe transform into something different. Thank you.

Igor Patrick: Are you grouping questions? Or should I?

Sarah Arkin: Yes, and does anybody have a related broadcasting question, that's a little different, that they'd like to add? No.

Audience/Carrie Nunez: Hi! I'm Carrie Nunez with the Falun Dafa Association. It's a volunteer organization. You mentioned that negative messaging doesn't work. Well what about positive messaging? Imagine a China where the Uyghurs could live freely, where Tibet could be free. And I think that Shen Yun Performing Arts really shows this because you're seeing China before Communism, and you're seeing the Chinese values that we all love, honesty, loyalty, respect for our family, and so on. And I think that you know Shen Yun Performing Arts reaches a million live audiences every year. And so that's really good. The question is like listening to

the dissidents and refugees themselves and somebody mentioned, like the 2 agents, tried to bribe an IRS agent to strip Shen Yun of its funding and luckily they got caught. But what if they didn't? And that seems very risky.

Sarah Arkin: So I think this brings us to the point of what can we do to help send an alternative vision. Thanks. Over to Lynne.

Audience/Lynne Weil: Thank you, Sarah, and I'd like to echo Sim for first of all in congratulating and thanking the panelists as well as Sarah for bringing these experts together and your colleagues at the ACPD. I'm a former staff member with the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, House Committee on Foreign Affairs, the State Department's public diplomacy Bureau and the U.S. Agency for Global Media - basically can't hold down a job in D.C. and a lifelong learner and interested in public diplomacy, since being an exchange student. We're here in part because this venue is on Capitol Hill. There are lots of other venues where the ACPD meets. But given that there may be Congressional staff in the room or online working from home or their offices, as well as people who can influence decisions on the hill through advocacy, I'd like to come back to the point of what can be done on the American PD side and really hit home, if you had the resources, what could be done to ensure that we wage a more fair battle against disinformation and malign influence, particularly coming from China? Thank you.

Sarah Arkin: We'll start there, and I'm going to ask our panelists to keep their answers tight and specific. And I'm going to start with Sarah.

Sarah Cook: That last question is complicated. I think we've mentioned a lot of ideas here, I mean, I do think it is worth mentioning again that the GEC was not reauthorized, and I think that's unfortunate, because that had multiple functions, including, to be honest, it helped provide some of the funding for the project I worked on at Freedom House, which helped not only expose some of the CCP's media influence and a lot of what we've spoken about today, but also build up some of that local capacity, and as much as I'm aware of some of the other funding and work that the GEC was doing, there was a lot of that type of support.

And that's really important. And there's now a gap there. And so, whether there is additional funding that is in that form of that agency, or some other different bureau in the State Department having clear funding available that serves that purpose is really important, because the U.S. is a really important player and donor in terms of the civil society funding space.

On the IBAB, one thing I understand they're doing more of is the different language Bureaus are starting to have specific China people doing China like RFERL has someone who does China stuff in that region. And that's really produced a lot of really interesting and important reporting. So that does seem like an innovation recently that I hope could continue.

On that one other point regarding the positive messaging, and both the role of Shen Yun Performing Arts or other initiatives like that - that does seem like something that local embassies, thinking about how to help support, whether it's American initiatives or other diaspora initiatives that present an alternative view of China, or if you have Uyghurs who are coming to really make sure that they're not getting censored because the Chinese Embassy and the diplomats put a lot of pressure on theaters and venues to stifle these kinds of performances or art presentations or things like that. And the U.S. can play a really important role in helping rebuff that especially if it's U.S. based company. But even more broadly, that element of giving a platform for these alternative voices from China, because again that is so much of what the CCP tries to quash. A lot of local audiences in different countries may not have access to some of those diaspora communities, because you just don't have very many Uyghurs in Africa or in Argentina.

Sarah Arkin: I'm going to move on. Would you like to add anything additional to what Sarah has already outlined?

Igor Patrick: Yes, very briefly. For the last question, I think we all spoke here about the need for more funding, and this very important. I just wanted to give two very brief ideas. The first one, as I mentioned, I was only able to find these contracts between China Daily and many newspapers in Brazil, because of FARA and not many countries in Latin America have this experience in trying to come up with legislation in terms of not regulating media, but establishing parameters specifically when there is a foreign power involved. So I think exchange programs and sharing legislative experiences around this field could be very helpful with governments in the region.

I must stress that I'm not advocating for censorship. I do think that the Chinese do have the right to have their own media outlets and share their opinions as long as it's clear and transparent and people know where it's coming from.

I think most of the time of course, money and exchange programs and funding for stories is so important. But what we journalists really need very often is access to sources. So, if you could provide more sources to these journalists, and make them available.

Sarah Arkin: Indeed, that is one of our recommendations in the [ACPD Annual Report](#).

Igor Patrick: Yeah, so I think very often government officials here in the U.S. tend to talk to U.S. media, or they tend to prioritize talking to U.S. media. And sometimes it's very difficult to have access. Just to give a personal example, I work for the South China Morning Post, which is a Hong Kong Independent newspaper, but some people think that we are state media. So most of the times when we try to reach out to get their perspectives on stories, they don't reply.

So this is important and in terms of missing opportunities for all of those media outlets look at what the BBC has been doing. The BBC is well known and well respected across the world for

their journalism, and at least in Latin America I know that they have content sharing agreements with a number of media outlets. What distinguishes the VOA, for example, from I don't know Xinhua [News Agency] or Sputnik news from Russia, for example, is the fact that VOA is independent, right, like it is authorized to criticize whoever, whenever they want.

And there is good journalism being produced there that doesn't have the right channel to be broadcast to other people, so reach out to media outlets, offer them this content, offer to do stories together and see how it goes.

Samantha Custer; Yeah, building on that. In response to your question, Luis, I think it's about practicing strategic empathy with where domestic media outlets are, particularly in low middle income countries. It's not so much that they're like: “oh, out of all of the options, I really really want to use this Xinhua content.” More often it's: “I have no budget. I have limited time. I can get this content for free and plug and play.”

Igor Patrick: And they see it as like, they're broadcasting the Chinese perspective on things.

Samantha Custer: Yeah. And so, you know, there's an opportunity for the U.S., in a more transparent way, to be able to help these journalists source reliable content. And I think also the training in strong professional norms of journalism goes with that. On the messaging question. So I'm going to talk about positive messaging from this example set. You talked about human rights violations in Xinjiang. You could have a whole negative messaging campaign on why these are bad things... but I agree with you that these are often falling on deaf ears. Positive messaging could be another way to approach this...talking about how democracy delivers. Because if you think about one of the reasons why people are tone deaf to human rights abuses, there's an incredible amount of under confidence and skepticism and uncertainty in many parts of the world about whether democracy is really actually improving the lives of communities. And if that's the case, well, China seems to have gotten a lot of things figured out. Maybe these human rights aren't so bad. And so, I think you need a positive messaging that counters this apathy towards human rights that is about showcasing a positive alternative.

Positive messaging could be another way to approach this....talking about how democracy delivers. —Samantha Custer

On the Capitol Hill question. One thing, I hope, I emphasized in my remarks is that public diplomacy and informational broadcasting are not “nice to haves.” These are not the things to cut the budgets for. These are things that if you cut those budgets, you are really hurting U.S. economic security, political security... all of our interests, because you can't promote positive

messages about the U.S. and you can't counter false narratives. So what could be done? I think the answer to that is yes, more money, but also focus that money where it makes sense. Don't focus on tools, focus on outcomes. What are you trying to achieve? There's horror stories I have heard from people in the public diplomacy space in the U.S that went to the U.S. Congress and said, “We want to move money out of this set of tools, move it into another, because we actually find this is more effective.” And they were denied. The response was instead: “stick with the plan.” And it was almost like there was a fixation, that somewhere along the lines, they had decided that this was the tool that was the one to focus on, irrespective of the outcomes. I think, relatedly part of the way you get clarity on outcomes is a clearer and more candid understanding about how public diplomacy is central to our U.S. national security and articulating what that looks like.

Sarah Arkin: Thank you, Samantha. I think that would be a really good way to end. But we still have four minutes. So, what I'd like to do is, turn to the specific questions online. I think this conversation could go on for hours. And again, as I said at the top, we didn't even look into what I think is actually another really important part. And perhaps we'll have another meeting on some of these recognized programs, the academic exchanges, the training programs, and that is a whole other component of the relationship that I think is perhaps worth another conversation. The specific questions here are, can somebody please describe the Luban workshops in greater detail? Although I'm going to assume we can find that clearly online somewhere, and maybe not, or maybe not. Samantha has some thoughts on that. And then a bigger question we certainly won't have time to go into, but very timely, TikTok and the engagement or non-engagement with TikTok. Is that a tool? Are we right to limit TikTok? I think that conversation is beyond the scope of this [meeting].

Is there anybody with another burning question, or related that they would like to throw in? Yes, sir. And then I'm going to ask our panelists to give us about 60 seconds of very brilliant, concise responses, and perhaps if they're available in person to stay for a little bit, and then I would encourage you also to look them up and look at the research that they've done and what they're working on.

Audience/Brandon Andrews: Hi everybody, I'm Brandon Andrews, former Hill Staffer turned AI entrepreneur. I was in Shanghai last year with the UN. I hosted an event at the World AI Conference, and of course, everyone knows the U.S. is the undisputed leader in artificial intelligence. But attending a lot of AI conferences, everyone says - Hey, this is how we're different. We're catching up, etc. - [it's] no different in Shanghai - in December you may have seen the headline around DeepSeek, which has come out and a lot of neutral arbiters say it's at least comparable to GPT. Of course, the news out of China is, it's better than GPT. My question is, how do you think DeepSeek, if it is comparable to GPT, could impact public diplomacy, whether it's in newsrooms and it's used there around the world or personally? Of course, if you ask DeepSeek what happened at Tiananmen Square, it doesn't answer. So no surprise there. And then two, given the importance strategically of artificial intelligence, what kind of resources do you think should be brought to bear on the policy perspective that might be helpful? Thank you.

Sarah Arkin: Thank you. 60 seconds, perhaps 90 for each of you, and I think it's clear that there's perhaps demand for further conversation.

Samantha Custer: Luban workshops. I think this is a prime example of how there's an economic piece, there's a public diplomacy piece, and there's a narrative piece. So Luban workshops are higher education institutions in China, partnering with multinational corporations or corporations in China, and then partnering with a company and an educational institution in a counterpart nation and essentially providing access to educational credit and company expertise in a way to train local workforces. It actually is an interesting case of this is China reacting to criticism about workers for Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) projects being imported from China. I am not an expert on TikTok, but one of the things I will say is that short form video audio content, particularly via these new innovative social media channels are critical. And I think this is a challenge for U.S. public diplomacy, because it's not scripted. How many clearances do you need to go through to access and to engage on these forums? And then, of course, we have security considerations about whether you use it or not. But people all over the world are using it. And then on the AI piece, I mean, I don't even know where to begin on that one that's like so tricky. The one thing I will say is: there's a danger when you don't see the algorithms that are behind tools like this the way that things are defined. And the sources that are used, are they trustworthy or not? And that is in spades when you think about this being promoted by an authoritarian regime, where transparency is low, and the ability to control that tool and that asset is so high.

Sarah Arkin: Sarah, I'm going to give you a final word, and then I will close us out.

Sarah Cook: Sure, I like to end on an optimistic note. I think this is a really big challenge, and the Chinese Government and Communist party is investing a tremendous amount of resources. And they really do in many ways see this as a high-level strategic priority, whether it's about the global messaging or about silencing voices, including maybe in some of these [cases], especially among Chinese and other diaspora communities. But there's also a lot of resilience and the project that we did, you know, just found country after country of examples of really innovative, investigative reporting or civil society efforts or research Institutes. There's a fellow in Nigeria. They started an institute to help inform local Nigerian provincial officials about how Chinese local influence efforts work in terms of politics and economics and the leverage. And so I think there really is a lot happening around the world. And there's a really important role for the U.S. to play in helping coordinate and bring those voices together and amplify those voices. And so I do think that if you look at 10 years ago there just wasn't that much of that happening. People weren't talking about it. There wasn't a recognition of the challenges. Again, not only in the U.S. but at the local level in so many places where people are starting to see these dynamics infringe on the local information ecosystem. And so I think that really is something for the U.S. to think strategically about how to better capitalize on and nurture because I think that really is also a big part of the difference in the model, because, you know, the Chinese Government hates civil, you know, real, independent, civil

society, but that's one of really the primary strengths that democracies in the United States have. So we should double down on that.

Sarah Arkin: I love that as a closing message. I will just address a couple of things. On the AI, I think it's really important that we think about AI. Everybody wants to talk about AI, and I think this piece of it- of understanding how it has an opportunity to really shape the information space given the reach and scope that China has is really important, and thank you for raising it and bringing it up. And in that vein, looking at TikTok, I think, without talking about the national security implications of TikTok in the United States and the use and why and that is, I do think, and this is another recommendation we'll have and that is the United States' ability to engage on these kinds of platforms, in this kind of short form way to use the oft maligned term – “meeting people where they are.” That is important, though, so figuring out how to leverage those platforms, even if we don't have them and use them. And that is important.

The final thing I want to say, and this is a good way to wrap up the conversation to Samantha's point is, I think, within the public diplomacy world at the State Department, as bureaucratic, as you know, moving at the speed of bureaucrats, I think there is a growing recognition in the State Department about looking at policy oriented outcomes and aligning the way embassies are staffed to look at policies and programs and audiences, not just programs. And I agree that going forward as we look at how budgets are shaped and programs are shifted out that is really important.

I will conclude with a plug for one of the next projects from ACPD which is looking at data driven outcomes and how data drives diplomacy and how public diplomacy can use research and evaluation and methodological efforts to develop the best kinds of programs and hopefully, that will influence our outcome. So, with that, thank you for everybody who stayed for these few extra minutes. Thank you to our panel for a really interesting conversation.

Thank you to everybody for coming, and I hope we can continue this conversation in myriad ways. With that I will formally conclude this meeting of the Advisory Commission and hope everybody has a good day.

Thanks, very much.

END OF TRANSCRIPT