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Foreign Native Advertising

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I. Introduction

Since 2011, readers in the United States have been able to get news on China from a multi-page special section named *China Watch* in the *Washington Post*, the *Wall Street Journal*, and the *New York Times* (Cook, 2017; Fallows, 2011). Unfortunately, instead of being a special editorial column on China, the *China Watch* section is a paid supplement provided by *China Daily*, a Chinese government-controlled English-language newspaper (Fallows, 2011). As of March 2018, the *China Daily* had cooperated with, and provided *China Watch* content to, more than 40 legacy news media in over 20 countries with a circulation of 4 million people.¹ This is all part of *China Daily's* strategy to use the platforms and reputations of partnership publishers to increase the worldwide audience for its news stories (China Daily, 2018). China is not the only country that pays western legacy media outlets to publish news stories from government-controlled media. *Russia Beyond*, a Russian government-controlled media outlet, has also paid to place news stories in the *Washington Post* under the name *Russia Now*.² Unlike conventional sponsored content or advertisements, the news stories provided by *China Watch* and *Russia Now* camouflage themselves as standard editorial content from the hosting media outlet. As a result, people are often unaware that they are reading sponsored and paid content provided by a foreign government.

Communication scholars and journalists refer to paid content and advertisements that camouflage themselves as standard editorial content as *native advertising*. These scholars have tended to focus on native advertising in the context of commercial products (Carlson, 2015; Iversen and Knudsen, 2017; Jamieson et al., 2000; Batsell, 2018; Edmonds, 2017; Einstein, 2016; Mullin, 2017). Given that foreign governments are paying for things like *China Watch*, we refer to this as *foreign native advertising*. While there is a large and growing litera-

¹Legacy media refer to older and more traditional media outlets such as newspapers, television, and radio, in which the audience does not 'interact' with the media content.

²The hosted website and column russianow.washingtonpost.com disappeared in 2015. For information and reports on *Russia Now*, see Barton (2015) and the *Washington Free Beacon* (2014).

ture on the media and propaganda in political science, much of it focuses on media ownership and the type of hard and heavy-handed propaganda that is easily detected (Di Tella and Franceschelli, 2011; Gehlbach and Sonin, 2014; Archer and Clinton, 2018; Huang, 2015, 2018; Little, 2017). Little attention has been paid to the type of soft propaganda found in foreign native advertising. This is despite the obvious political implications and ethical issues that are at stake.

Why would the independent mainstream media in a country put their reputation at risk by publishing the political messages of a foreign government? What impact does foreign native advertising have on news consumers? Why do governments engage in this type of foreign propaganda? There are many questions regarding foreign native advertising that need to be answered. In this short essay, we examine the motivation of the parties engaged in foreign native advertising.³ In particular, we highlight how foreign native advertising helps ameliorate the control-credibility tradeoff faced by foreign governments and the revenue-credibility tradeoff faced by domestic media outlets. We also briefly describe some of the initial results from a survey experiment we conducted on foreign native advertising using real political stories placed by the Chinese government in the *Washington Post* and the *Telegraph*. Somewhat alarmingly, we find that respondents are often unable to distinguish paid political advertisements from standard news articles, irrespective of their level of education and media literacy. Moreover, respondents rate the paid political advertisements in the Western mainstream media as more credible than the exact same content in the Chinese government-controlled news outlet, the *China Daily*.

II. Foreign Native Advertising

International or foreign propaganda is not new. Governments have long engaged in various activities, such as state-owned international broadcasting and public relations campaigns, to influence public attitudes in foreign countries.⁴ For example, throughout the Cold War, the U.S. government sponsored *Voice of America* to broadcast into the Soviet Union and its satellite states as a strategy to counter Soviet propaganda, and

has expanded the languages and geographic scope of its broadcasts since the end of the Cold War (Krugler, 2000). In addition to its government-funded international broadcasting activities, the United States has also implemented public relations campaigns in other countries in which it purchases space or services on a foreign country's media to broadcast messages targeting foreign citizens. One such program, the 'Shared Values Initiative', was targeted at the Muslim world after the September 11 attacks and saw the U.S. government pay local media in major Muslim countries to broadcast a series of commercials showing the positive aspects of Muslim life in the United States (Kendrick and Fullerton, 2004).

Unlike much of the historical political advertising in foreign media, foreign native advertising attempts to imitate the objective journalism of the hosting media outlets. Like *commercial* native advertising, foreign native advertising appears as editorial content in an attempt to recreate the experience of reading objective news stories, and in doing so aims to deceive readers. Readers often have no idea that what they are reading is paid content from a foreign government.

The Chinese Communist Party (CCP) has also invested considerable resources in international broadcasting, such as through the foreign language services of Chinese Central Television (CCTV), with the goal of rectifying the perceived distortion in the international flow of information about China (Brady, 2015; Rawnsley, 2015; Edney, 2012). Studies show that China also uses its state news agency, Xinhua, to provide information directly to U.S. news outlets (Cheng, Golan and Kiouisis, 2016). In addition to state-sponsored international broadcasting, the CCP has for a long time engaged in 'borrowing foreign newspapers', a strategy that involves building strong relationships with foreign journalists so that they write positive news stories about China (China Daily, 2017). To a large extent, it was this

³Our essay is based on our working paper, "Soft propaganda, misinformed citizens, and source credibility: A survey experiment on foreign native advertising" (Dai and Luqiu, 2018).

⁴Governments who engage in these types of activities tend to refer to them as *public diplomacy* to avoid the negative implications often associated with the word propaganda (Black, 2001; Zaharna, 2010). At the same time, they refer to these same activities by foreign governments as *international propaganda* (Misyuk, 2013).

strategy of ‘borrowing foreign newspapers’ that later evolved into foreign native advertising – the practice of directly placing paid news stories disguised as standard editorial content into foreign legacy newspapers and onto foreign-owned television and radio programs (Brady, 2015).

In our opinion, there are at least three significant differences between traditional forms of international propaganda and the relatively new practice of foreign native advertising. First, unlike traditional international broadcasting where governments sponsor and maintain broadcasting services in foreign languages and foreign countries, foreign native advertising uses foreign media outlets themselves as its platform. Compared to government-sponsored international broadcasting platforms, foreign legacy media outlets are likely to have much larger audiences and greater credibility among the local citizens.

Second, unlike much of the historical political advertising in foreign media, foreign native advertising attempts to imitate the objective journalism of the hosting media outlets. Like *commercial* native advertising, foreign native advertising appears as editorial content in an attempt to recreate the experience of reading objective news stories, and in doing so aims to deceive readers. Readers often have no idea that what they are reading is paid content from a foreign government (Ferrer Conill, 2016; Schauster, Ferrucci and Neill, 2016). In Figure 1, we show a paid supplement from the Chinese government that was placed under the World News section of the *Telegraph*, one of the most reputable media outlets in the United Kingdom. One of the goals of foreign native advertising is to deceive the audience into thinking that the content on the *China Watch* page is a standard part of the *Telegraph*’s World News section.

Third, foreign native advertising is a form of propaganda and advertising, and should not be considered the same as other types of third-party content. It is true that many news outlets use third-party content provided by organizations such as Reuters and Xinhua. However, news outlets must pay for the services and content provided by these third-party organizations. Moreover, they are also able to control the content of this material by selecting and editing the stories according to their own interests. In contrast, foreign native advertising involves domestic media outlets being *paid* to place content on their platforms by foreign governments *without*

the ability to select or edit that content. With foreign native advertising, the content that is published is chosen not because of its news value but because of the revenue that it generates.

III. Understanding Foreign Native Advertising

Two parties must cooperate for foreign native advertising to occur. A foreign government must want to engage in foreign native advertising and a domestic media outlet must be willing to accept the advertising content. There are tradeoffs facing both the foreign government and the domestic media outlet.

Control and credibility tradeoff. Foreign governments face a tradeoff between control and credibility when it comes to the information environment. In most countries, the media is in a position to play an important role in holding governments accountable by providing information to the citizenry. A consequence of this is that governments have an incentive to try to influence how the media covers politics. Traditionally, governments and other political actors have attempted to influence media coverage through methods of direct control such as media ownership or through methods of indirect control such as sponsorship of, or subsidies to, media outlets. Even if they are technically independent, media outlets whose largest advertisers are political actors often demonstrate positive bias in their reporting towards these actors. For example, media outlets tend to provide less coverage to political scandals that involve their political sponsors (Di Tella and Franceschelli, 2011). Such direct and indirect control of the media comes with potential costs, though. The more control that political actors exert over the media and the more pro-government bias is exhibited by the media, the less likely citizens are to view the stories reported by the media as credible. This is important as we know that people pay less attention to media that they do not find credible (Johnson and Kaye, 1998), and that the content provided by credible media outlets is perceived as more persuasive (Pornpitakpan, 2004). Foreign native advertising shifts this control-credibility tradeoff in the government’s favor. In effect, foreign governments get to directly control the content of news reports while maximizing the credibility of these reports by mimicking standard editorial content and exploiting the good reputation of the hosting independent media.

Revenue and credibility tradeoff. While foreign gov-

Figure 1: A Screen-shot of the *China Watch* Page on *The Telegraph* in the United Kingdom

The Telegraph

HOME | NEWS | SPORT | BUSINESS | ALL SECTIONS

News | World news


China Watch Home | Business | Culture | Politics | Society | Sport | Technology | Travel

THIS CONTENT IS PRODUCED AND PUBLISHED BY CHINA DAILY, PEOPLE'S REPUBLIC OF CHINA, WHICH TAKES SOLE RESPONSIBILITY FOR ITS CONTENTS

China Watch

Bringing you informative and diverse stories about contemporary China's dynamic development, including the latest news from the Technology, Business, Travel, Culture, Society and Sports sectors


Business



Hard facts on trade between China and the US spelt out




China seeks pacts on robotics



Foreign investors receive assurances

China will continue proactively attracting foreign investment and safeguarding the legitimate interests of foreign-invested businesses as part of an effort to shore up the economy, the top leadership of the Communist Party of China decided on Wednesday.



Jack Ma, Bill Gates to attend CIIE forum

ernments face a tradeoff between control and credibility when it comes to the information environment, media outlets face a tradeoff between revenue and credibility. Media outlets value their credibility, but they also need reliable sources of revenue. Credibility and revenue are not necessarily in conflict. For example, we can imagine that credible media outlets might enjoy larger audiences, which, in turn, lead to higher revenues. However, the increasing ease with which individuals can obtain information from the Internet and social media means that individuals are less willing to pay for news than they were in the past. This development obviously threatens the revenue base of traditional media outlets such as newspapers (Kaye and Quinn, 2010). One way to generate additional revenue is to accept government sponsorship, subsidies, or advertisements. Accepting government support, though, especially financial support from foreign governments, is likely to damage the credibility and reputation of independent news media outlets. The expected costs of engaging in foreign native advertising depend on (1) the probability that one's au-

dience detects that the information being provided is an advertisement from a foreign government rather than a standard news story and (2) the magnitude of the negative impact on the hosting media site's credibility if the advertisement is detected. Although the potential costs to a media outlet's credibility are likely to be high if the foreign native advertising is detected, there are reasons to believe that the probability of detection is low due to the deceptive nature of foreign native advertising. Several studies have examined these issues in the context of *commercial* native advertising. For example, Wojdyski and Evans (2016) find that only 8% of respondents are able to identify a native advertising piece as sponsored as opposed to standard editorial content. Another study finds that 77% of respondents did not recognize native advertisements as advertising and that 54% of the respondents felt deceived by the native advertising when it was revealed to them (Contently, 2016). Domestic media outlets will accept foreign native advertising if they believe that the expected costs are low (because the probability of detection is small) relative to the revenue

benefits.

IV. An Experiment on Foreign Native Advertising

In what follows, we briefly discuss an online survey experiment we conducted to examine various aspects of foreign native advertising (Dai and Luqiu, 2018).

Research design. Respondents were asked to read a real *China Watch* article published by either the *Washington Post* or the *Telegraph*. Although the *Washington Post* and the *Telegraph* both have *China Watch* webpages with sponsored articles from the *China Daily*, the clarity of disclosure is quite different across the two media outlets. In the case of the *China Watch* webpage published by the *Telegraph*, there is no disclosure that the content is being *sponsored* or *advertised* by the *China Daily*. Instead, there is just a short statement in small font at the top of each article saying that “this content is produced and published by *China Daily*, People’s Republic of China, which takes sole responsibility for its content.” Nowhere is it indicated that the articles are advertisements paid for by the Chinese government. Although still confusing, the disclosure that accompanies the *China Watch* articles published by the *Washington Post* is more prominent. The label “advertisement” appears at the top of each article. At the bottom of each article is a statement indicating that “this content is paid for and provided by an advertiser, and the site is managed by WP BrandStudio. The *Washington Post* newsroom and WP BrandStudio were not involved in the creation of this content.” There is no indication that the advertiser involved is the Chinese government.

Although it would be ideal to use the same *China Watch* article from the *Washington Post* and the *Telegraph* to avoid any ‘content effects’, this is not possible as *China Daily* intentionally avoids displaying identical articles in different media outlets. We therefore chose two similar articles that addressed the same topic — China’s plan to continue with market reforms. We chose economic/business news articles because these are the main types of news reports displayed on the *China Watch* sections of the *Washington Post* and the *Telegraph*. After reading their *China Watch* article, respondents were asked several questions about the source and credibility of the information they saw.

Two control conditions were employed in the study. In each condition, the respondents read one of the two

available articles but on the original *China Daily* website instead of on the *China Watch* pages of the *Washington Post* or the *Telegraph*.

Results and implications. We now briefly summarize some of the empirical results from our experiment and discuss their implications. Were the respondents able to identify that the *China Daily* was the true source of the articles? Respondents who received the *China Watch* article from the *Washington Post*, which provides more disclosure information, are much more likely to correctly identify the true source of the article than respondents who received the *China Watch* article from the *Telegraph*. Significantly, a respondent’s ability to identify the true source of the article that they read was unrelated to their level of education or media literacy. Together these results challenge the common assumption that citizens, especially those with high levels of education, are able to detect government propaganda. This is particularly the case when source disclosure is unclear.

Does the credibility of the hosting media site go down when respondents are informed that the article they received is a paid advertisement from the government-controlled *China Daily*? To get at this question, we asked respondents to indicate their level of trust in the *Washington Post* or the *Telegraph* before receiving their *China Watch* article and after being informed about the true source of the article. As expected, the post-treatment level of trust in the hosting media outlet and the Chinese government are both significantly lower than the pre-treatment level of trust in these organizations. In addition, we find that the magnitude of the drop in trust in the *Washington Post* and the *Telegraph* increases with the level of trust respondents initially reported in these media outlets.

Are the *China Watch* articles that appear on the *Washington Post* and the *Telegraph* considered more persuasive than the same articles that appear on *China Daily*? To get at this question we asked respondents whether the article they read was unbiased, convincing, and told the whole story. As expected, we find that respondents consider the *China Watch* articles to be much more accurate, unbiased, and convincing than the same articles on the original *China Daily* platform, but only when they think the article is from the hosting media outlet. Our results here strongly support our argument that the effectiveness of foreign native advertising de-

depends on its deceptiveness. Our results also suggest that foreign native advertising can be much more effective than traditional forms of foreign propaganda based on international broadcasting or more conventional advertising practices.

V. Conclusion

In this short essay, we have examined a new form of foreign propaganda, foreign native advertising, in which foreign governments buy space on independent media sites in other countries to publish state-sponsored content that mimics the standard editorial content found on the hosting media sites. While it might seem puzzling that an independent media outlet would risk its reputation by cooperating with the propaganda activities of a foreign government, we argue that the expected reputational cost to the hosting media outlet depends on both the likelihood of detection and the size of the decrease in its reputation if the propaganda is detected. Because of the deceptive nature of foreign native advertising, the expected costs associated with allowing this sort of advertising, relative to the revenue that is generated, is often quite low.

Using an online survey experiment, we find that respondents are unlikely to detect the true source of foreign native advertising, irrespective of their level of education and experience as a news consumer, unless the news story being reported is clearly disclosed as a paid advertisement. This finding challenges the view that citizens with high education are able to detect propaganda. Although respondents significantly lower their level of trust in the hosting media outlet after learning that a news story is a paid advertisement, the low likelihood that news consumers will detect the true source of the information means that the expected reputational costs of allowing foreign native advertising is low to the hosting media outlet. The deceptive nature of foreign native advertising makes it an effective tool for foreign governments to influence the citizenry of other countries. As we show in our results, the same message is perceived as much more persuasive when it comes in the form of foreign native advertising on an independent media outlet than when it comes in the form of news on a foreign state-controlled media site.

Given the persuasiveness of foreign native advertising and the obvious desire of foreign governments to influence the attitudes and behavior of citizens in other

countries, it is important to understand the strategy behind, and purposes of, such propaganda. In a future research project, we plan to investigate the purpose of foreign Chinese propaganda by examining the substantive content of its foreign native advertising. We plan to do this by using the original text data we have been collecting from the *Washington Post*, the *Telegraph*, and the *China Daily*.

Although our findings may seem troubling in that citizens are often unable to detect foreign native advertising and are likely to be influenced by such propaganda, our analysis also suggests one possible way to deter such propaganda. Much of the effectiveness of foreign native advertising and the size of the reputational costs accruing to the hosting media site depend on the deceptiveness of the advertising. This suggests that third parties who highlight and publicize the presence and use of foreign native advertising can reduce the effectiveness of such propaganda techniques and increase the reputational costs for domestic media outlets. This will hopefully reduce the incentives that foreign governments have to engage in these sorts of foreign propaganda activities and deter independent media outlets from cooperating with foreign agencies.

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The Relationship between State and Corporate Censorship

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In the fall of 2018, the 20 most frequently accessed websites worldwide almost exclusively included search engines, such as Google, Baidu, and Yandex, and social media platforms, such as YouTube, Facebook, Twitter, and Weibo.¹ As more people are connecting to the world wide web across the globe, more users are spending longer hours on a smaller number of websites. In countries that have only recently experienced rising levels of digitalization, many users access the Internet through zero-rated services, such as Facebook's Free Basics, that allow them to surf a small set of websites (including a lightweight version of Facebook) for free while having to pay for further access (*Global Voices*

¹ An exception is Wikipedia, which is ranked fifth, according to *Alexa*.