Center for Strategic and International Studies

China Reality Check Series

“Media and Ideology in Xi’s China”

Featuring:
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CHRISTOPHER K. JOHNSON: Hi. My name is Chris Johnson. I’m the Freeman chair in China studies here at CSIS. Thanks for coming to see us today for this fantastic event. We’re very pleased to have our two panelists with us today. It’s going to be an exciting discussion on Chinese ideology and propaganda.

Main presenter today will be Dr. Maria Repnikova, who is a scholar of political communication in an illiberal context, with a focus on Chinese media politics. She’s current an assistant professor of global communications, and a director of the Center for Global Information Studies at Georgia State University. Maria’s work examines critical journalism, political propaganda, cyber-nationalism, and global media branding in China. Her work appeared in China Quarterly, New Media and Society, the journey—excuse me—Journal of Contemporary China, as well as Foreign Affairs, and Foreign Policy, amongst other venues. And her book, “Media Politics in China: Improvising Power Under Authoritarianism,” just came out with Cambridge University Press, which gave us the idea to host her today. (Laughs.) And in the past, Maria was a postdoctoral fellow at the Annenberg School for Communication. And, as I mentioned, she holds a Ph.D. in politics from Oxford University, where she was a Rhodes Scholar. So certainly, a very strong expert on the subject.

We’re also joined by Kaiser Kuo, who is host and co-founder of the Sinica Podcast, the most popular English language podcast on China, and just a fantastic resource for anyone who’s looking at China on a regular basis. A native of upstate New York, born to parents originally from China, Kaiser spent a year in Beijing after graduating from the University of California Berkeley. In 1989, he co-founded the Beijing-based heavy metal band Tang Dynasty, a band that went to considerable success during the 1990s. He then took a position as editor and chief at China Now, one of China’s first bilingual online magazines, where he oversaw an editorial team across China of over 30 writers. Kaiser wrote a popular humor column in China’s English-language newspaper, That’s Beijing and the Beijinger from 2001 to 2011, with his columns anthologized in 2009 in a book called “Ich Bin Ein Beijinger.” So we’re very happy to have him here to commentate today.

So if you will, please join me in welcoming Dr. Repnikova to the podium to deliver her address. Thank you. (Applause.)

MARIA REPNIKOVA: So thank you very much for having me. Thank you, Scott Kennedy, for inviting me, and to Chris for moderating. And it’s an honor to be next to Kaiser, whose work I’ve observed and listened to for many years. So today we’re going to talk about the very significant and tumultuous topic of Chinese media politics and ideology under President Xi. And I suspect most of you came here to hear what’s new, right. In this era, we always hear about new outbreaks, new updates, in particular when it comes to control.

But I want to start perhaps with a slight bit of disappointment, because the main dominant media policy in China since the Mao era has really remained quite constant when it comes to the media really serving the party’s interests. Although the terms that are used to described this role have changed – as you see here on the slide – the change from propaganda, to guidance of the public opinion, to public opinion challenge, to public opinion struggle. So the terms that are used are quite – somewhat distinct, but the idea that the media should serve the party’s interest has not really transformed.

And despite the focus in the past month and even the past years, I would say, on President Xi’s address to top three official news outlets and this whole idea of media having the last name of the party
or being the mouthpiece of the party as something revolutionary, my analysis of the same phenomena over the past decade suggests that similar statements, just in different forms, were made by other officials – both at the central level, but also provincial and local levels. So the idea that the media should align with the party is something that’s been quite constant for a long time.

But that said, the party has been adapting and adjusting its mechanisms of persuasion and propaganda, in particular in the past several years. And its adaptation or reinvention goes far beyond the widely popularized, and to many of you familiar, notion of media crackdown. And of course, here is the process of crackdown that many of you have heard about – the intensification of censorship, centralization of internet regulation, the expansion of repression force for infusion of party’s ideology and Xi Jinping’s thought into every facet of public life.

But what often gets less understood, less talked about, are the softer modes of persuasion, the more subtle ways that the party’s trying to attract, luring the public into the party’s orbit. And that’s something I’m hoping to discuss with you today. But to start with, the idea that the public opinion is completely captured or controlled by the party, I would say, is somewhat false, because the reference to public opinion in Chinese discourse has been that of a battlefield. The idea that there’s a fight for public opinion, there’s a way to kind of struggle for it, as opposed to simply to capture it in one instant for control.

And Xi Jinping himself has talked about this notion of captivating online public opinion and the importance of more creative online propaganda – new energies, new synergies, new ideas are necessary. And many conferences have been convened over time to discuss the fact that this battlefield is something quite contentious and requires new tactics.

And while we hear a lot about the battlefield over the years, what’s new in the past several years are the challenges that are becoming quite astute, in particular the shrinkage of the traditional media industry. The newspaper industry is going down, as it is everywhere in the world. But in China, it’s been quite dramatic as well. Since 2016, the one-year statistics themselves, there’s about a 7.6 percent drop in the industry revenues for newspaper industry. But the larger revenues over the 10-year period are much, much higher when it comes to their shrinkage. So almost nobody’s reading newspapers.

And they’re paying much less to official messages of the past. You know, people are increasingly consuming various apps and they make self-media, all kinds of different platforms, including digital media outlets where it’s just basically catering content to individual consumers, where you can look at your stories on your feed and only read what you want to read as opposed to being forced to particular type of content in a newspaper.

So dealing with this crisis, you know, we see also some slogans, of course, that are familiar to many of you: visiting China, the celebration of 19th Party Congress, the China dream. And there was an article in New York Times over this weekend suggesting that, you know, over a commute to work or at the – journalists – all sorts of slogans and various kinds of forceful modes of propaganda. But if you look closely enough, who is paying attention, right? If you look at consumers, the so-called audience, they’re hardly looking up from their phones, and Chinese citizens, I would argue, are increasingly subsiding in sort of individualist platforms information consumption. They are hardly paying attention to those large posters that are so admirable hanging in various public spaces.
So it’s not quite working, what are the new upgrades? So today I just want to talk about three particular upgrades that I’ve been researching in my work. There are many other factors that might be new, but these are the ones I want to highlight because I think they are important, and they are also going to expand over the next few years.

The first one is the state-led digitalization and modernization of traditional media. The second is the personification of official ideology, the creation of a more personable, relatable and interactive imagery of President Xi. And the last one is globalization of China’s propaganda work; the idea of positioning China as a global leader, not only for global consumers, but also for Chinese domestic audience – primarily so I would argue.

So to start with the first notion of digitalization – this is sort of a response of the Chinese government to the crisis of – you know, the failing media industry, the traditional media industry decline which, of course, we’re all experiencing here in the West as well. But the difference is the Chinese government has a lot of money to rescue and to kind of reinvent the media sphere.

So this rescue has been manifesting itself in two ways. One is the creation of new, state-funded digital on the news outlets. They are only online and they are completely funded by the state, but they exist, subside within large state media corporations. And the second one is creation of new party media apps that are basically created to refresh and reinvent the image of official media like Xinhua News Agency and People’s Daily.

So the first digitalization manifestation, this idea of new media apps, particularly is present in Shanghai. Shanghai has been the center of innovation. I’ve been looking into this for the couple of years with a colleague at Penn, Pan Ku-Chung (ph), and we looked at Pengpai in particular. I don’t know how many of you have heard of this outlet, the paper. Anybody in the room has – (sounds of agreement) – a couple of people, a couple of you.

So it’s become quite popular, one of the most popular – I would say – media outlets in China, completely sponsored by Shanghai government. And the reason it has become so popular is because it’s really – has successfully created this imagery of a professional, almost commercialized – like news outlets – that publishes quite a bit of in-depth and some investigative reporting, but also pretty good journalism, but also very sophisticated and playful – what they refer to as cuteiffed propaganda, so very playful pieces about the party state and about President Xi, as well as very interactive features where users and readers can actually talk to the producers of content. They can directly chat with them. There are also two ways to engage sort of like in a podcast platform, but it’s actually a traditional sort of type news outlet.

So it has done very well, to the point that many other governments, across China – in particular, party propaganda officials – have tried to copy Pengpai. There was a big conference in Shanghai, which we read a lot about in our research, that brought together propaganda officials from all over China, as well as various journalists and editors, to learn from the success of Shanghai in general, but in particular, Pengpai was highlighted quite a bit – how do we copy this outlet, how do we copy its success?

So as you see here, these are just some names of the copycats of Pengpai that emerged all over China – not in every province, but quite a few places around the country. We visited each one of them and talked to their key producers, editors in charge. And journalists we found – unfortunately or maybe fortunately for some people there – actually failed for the most part. And the reason why they
failed is because local officials have been quite conservative with content creation. So unlike Pengpai that allowed for some more interesting and, one would say, even intriguing content to appear, all of those localized outlets started out with this idea that we want good journalism, we want to do investigative reporting, but they didn’t last very long because they started to really sort of die out over the months and turn into more like data journalism platforms or localized news, so they didn’t go – they didn’t go very far.

But at the same time, the attempt itself is quite fascinating; the idea that something emerges as center and has been attempted to copy, you know, across the country. I think it’s very interesting and important to pay attention to.

The second manifestation of digitalization is the emergence of various apps, you know, which have public accounts that are linked to official media like People’s Daily and Xinhua News, but they have different names, so – a lot of them have just different names. You don’t even know unless you know about these apps that they are directly sponsored by the party. And the environments within which journalists or producers of content work when it comes to those apps are also quite unique. They almost resemble start-up environment.

When I visited, it looks very open and free, there are a lot of young people gathered from across the country, and the content they create is sort of far away from very official, dogmatic kind of propaganda. They talk about practical tips of how to get a train ticket during high holiday season, you know, how to send your kids to university, how to pass national entrance exams, and also there is content referring to entertainment and popular culture. So really trying to kind of cater to young people and cater also quite individually to particular types of, you know, groups so it’s very much a content that’s – some of it is for younger women, some of it is for parents, some of it is for students. So it’s quite sophisticated and well-done. And there are many of these apps that have spread out in recent years, and they have been quite, quite popular amongst users.

So this is just a little bit popping up slowly, but this is – these are the different types of apps, and some of them have been really at the top of – (inaudible) – accounts when it comes to readership and likes. So how real that is and how much people are actually reading them versus clicking is the question, and I think a lot of the producers are asking the same question. But the idea that they’ve managed to go this far is already, I think, quite intriguing.

So the second upgrade that I wanted to discuss today is the personification of ideology. So we hear a lot about the dry propaganda discourse and the idea of the slogans and Xi Jinping’s thoughts and all of these things that I think we’ve read quite a bit about already. But how does Xi’s image get sold to younger people and to various consumers of social media online is through creation of somewhat of a warmer kind of personable imagery of a leader that we haven’t really seen in the previous era.

But to start with, beyond this imagery, you know, to start with the official media, what we see are just increasing mentions of President Xi – much higher mentions of his name, as we’ve seen from the China Media Project research in Tiangang (ph) and Hong Kong, this idea that he’s just been mentioned a lot more than any leader in the reform era, right? So this is Xi and these are all the reform-era leaders.

In the beginning, we have Mao Zedong, Hua Guofeng, so just the difference is quite startling when it comes to his predecessors in the reform period. And the titles that he’s been – he’s been given are also quite amazing, right, when it comes to his official titles. “Lingxiu,” the latest thing you all
have probably heard about, leader of the highest magnitude, this title has not been granted to any leader in the reform period either. So there is this idea of kind of glorification that goes alongside with official media propaganda.

But when it comes to the personable image, we see Xi as, you know, eating and talking to local workers, Xi as a class leader. That was one of the most popular pieces, actually. I think some of you may have seen it. A Pengpai reporter wrote this piece linking China kind of to a class, essentially, and a good class needs a strong leader, and Xi as, like, a class leader is also the right leader for the country. So was a little bit cheesy and a bit, you know, cute language that’s used, and you see him smiling to students. This piece has won a lot of praise from officials and young people alike, and the journalist got a huge bonus from his editors for this piece. So I don’t know, you know, what happened, but it was a big deal, apparently.

So you see these kind of pieces appearing and motivating other journalists to write similar stories. So the more you can be sophisticated and fun when it comes to reporting on your leader, the more benefits you might get, the more promotion you might get – of course, if you’re careful enough to make it also an official message about his skills and his accomplishments, so down to earth. And, of course, the names like Xi Dada and various sort of cuter names that are not just lingxiu, but they are also added to our common vocabulary and on various social media apps help to create this warmer imagery that is talked about.

And the creation of a multifaceted persona, as well. Here is Xi reading literature, right, all the books he’s read both in Western – by Western authors but also Chinese authors, and how he had to walk something like 15 kilometers to a local village when he was living in a small town just to pick up those books. That’s how dedicated he is to literature, right? So the idea of creating this very, you know, interesting multifaceted leadership-like persona which is attractive to more people, I think.

And the second facet of it is interactivity, which I think is actually very new and it’s very much a product of social media. So here is an app that allows you to follow Xi Jinping. You can see exactly where he went and what he’s doing there, so you can track your leader. And there are many competitors to this app, so apparently the service is popular. You know, you can go to another app and see, you know, all about his domestic travels, and there are more and less detailed reports, including behind-the-scenes pictures of his visits as well as the foreign visitors – dignitaries to China such as Prime Minister Modi and his very passionate visit to Xi’an. But a lot of media are now encouraged to provide these backstory accounts, whereas in the past we had never seen such detailed accounts of leaders’ travels. It was very much kind of a staged process. You don’t have this sort of glorification. You don’t have really any fun facts about it, either. It was something that was only done onstage.

And most recently this idea of interactivity has reached a new level of potential success at the 19th Party Congress, where we see this platform created by People’s Daily where one could sign on and essentially chat with party delegates, and you can be on chat with them, and you can also have your name up here next to President Xi. So just the idea – of course, it’s a ritual, so it’s not really like you’re chatting directly with them. But the fact that you’re able to pretend to be chatting or to even kind of imagine the idea of being a participant in the Congress is something new and fun.

And then, of course, there’s the clapping app that was created by Tencent – (laughter) – where netizens were judged, then encouraged to compete on how fast they clap to President Xi’s speech. So it’s about the intensification of clapping or the speed of clapping. And, you know, you can potentially win something. A lot of the apps actually urge you to participate, because you can win Kindles. You
can also win vouchers to restaurants and apple-picking places. So there are all kinds of different funny, pragmatic sort of almost marketing-like strategies that are used to encourage people to participate in these sort of products.

So, while we hear so much about those various drier type linguistic devices and slogans and posters, keep in mind that that’s only part of the story. You know, it’s what we see, and it’s often covered in Western media. But what’s happening on social-media platforms is a little bit different, and really, I think, similar to Western marketing strategies that one could use as a company. It’s not just a political kind of legitimation tool. You can observe it, I think, almost anywhere. Where somebody’s trying to gain influence, they create more interactive platforms, right? They try to create a better image, a warmer image of a leader. It’s not particularly Chinese or particularly authoritarian or political, I would say. It’s more a business strategy.

And the last one perhaps is a little bit counterintuitive, the idea of globalization of propaganda. I brought it up because, especially now, since in D.C. there’s so much talk about China’s foreign influence operations and also the soft versus sharp power the Chinese are exercising, right, overseas, but a lot of the soft-power operations or resources devoted to it are actually aimed also at domestic audiences. They’re really sold to domestic audiences. China being projected as a leader in the world is something fairly, I think, new, and it’s been done quite skillfully through three different ways that I’ve spotted, at least.

The first is through just global reporting by Chinese news outlets, so foreign correspondents reporting the world back to China. The second one is the creation of more nationalistic cultural products, films and so forth, that position China at the center of the world or a particular region. And lastly, there is indirect promotion, when we see coverage of China’s soft-power efforts appear in glorified vision – version – in traditional Chinese media reporting domestically, but also when voices of nationalists overseas or students who are patriotic are being kind of amplified and reported on Chinese media as well. So they’ve picked up, and then they’re kind of reborn, so to speak, domestically.

So, when it comes to the foreign correspondents telling China’s story, right – for example, yidijiandu, this campaign. Of course, many of you have heard about, Xi Jinping’s slogan of simply telling better China stories, which has been accompanied by huge investments into Chinese media abroad. So, unlike the Western media outlets that are shrinking their foreign correspondent bureaus, China is only expanding, and it has become one of the biggest players when it comes to reporting in Africa, for instance, based in Nairobi. But also Xinhua, for instance, has 102 bureaus, right, around the world. And this number is, again, expanding.

So where are those stories going? Some of them are going to global audiences, but many of them are going directly to Chinese consumers. And what kind of stories are coming out? They’re the stories that some schools refer to that have a China peg. So, of course, they position China in a particular light and in a particular way in the world, right? So a lot of sensitive issues don’t get covered. If we think about tensions amongst Chinese companies and local companies, say, in Africa, or labor standards, environmental issues, they don’t really tend to be highlighted in those reports. But we do see all the infrastructure that’s being built and all the good things that come out of this corporation that’s sold back to Chinese audiences.

We also see a certain interesting framing happening when it comes to reporting on global issues, right, or even Western democracy. So oftentimes the reporting on sort of the tumultuous
democratic process, the kind of weaker institutions, they’re inflexible and incapable of dealing with crises. It’s framed against more stable, malleable, and efficient institutions in China, right?

So it’s not so surprising that recently we’ve seen a report that argued that Chinese citizens have more faith and trust in their institutions than do American citizens and Western citizens in other democracies. They’re often being sold this frame and often sold the idea of comparisons – like, look at this other case and see how well we’re doing in contrast to the other examples you might be, you know, reading about. So I think it’s a very effective way, and we see it in a lot of different forms of discourse – online and traditional media, but also through various discussions amongst scholars and so forth.

So, in addition to this China peg or reporting of China, which we see through outlets like CGTN and Xinhua, we see in products like “Wolf Warrior 2.” I don’t know how many of you have watched this film. Some of you have, right? The positioning of China is at the center of Africa, right, overtaking the U.S. by far, a very glorified image through a famous actor, and it’s a kind of blockbuster-like Hollywood film, essentially.

Was it aimed at domestic audiences? Partially. But it was supposed to be a global success, right? It was a soft-power product, but it was one of the most popular films in China itself. So actually it did much better, I think, in domestic China than overseas. And it suggests that there is this hunger for these types of stories. There’s actually high demand for creation of more cultural products like it, and for more stories about China’s role in the world, not just about China’s domestic politics.

So when it doesn’t work out so much directly, there’s also – they’re also in direct channels. As you see here, this is just a billboard of China’s celebrities and various Chinese people you see here in Times Square. Many of you have heard of how much money China has put into putting those billboards in there to attract attention. It’s a soft-power tool.

Has it worked? Many argue, you know, from my interviews, that it was a bit of a failure or it didn’t do so well. But it’s been advertised and promoted also on domestic Chinese media channels. So the fact that you are able to put up a billboard in the middle of Times Square in New York is a way to suggest that, hey, we’re powerful, and you know, this is possible, and we’re doing really well. It’s a symbol, even though it might not attract, you know, a large audience, or maybe nobody’s looking up at the billboard in particular when passing by in New York.

And I think the most interesting movement – perhaps it’s something that’s probably going to expand – is this idea of glorifying nationalistic voices overseas. They’re actually homegrown or bottom-up voices. They’re not being manufactured by any media outlets. This is a picture of the national flag campaign. This is an Australian Ph.D. student who started in 2014, and it went completely viral with many students taking pictures with their flag across the globe, right, the idea of saying that we’re still, you know, patriotic and we care about China. And this campaign was picked up in Chinese domestic media and advertises patriotism of post-‘90s generation. And while the quotes they use is that how dare you say that, you know, post-‘90s are not patriotic? We are patriotic, and we say so loudly. You know, we love China and we say so loudly. So this idea of, you know, love for your motherland amongst the youngest people, which is college students, is very powerful, I think. And it’s a powerful message to bring back home and to sell it in domestic media.

So that’s something that’s just another example. But there are many cases like this, and I think we’ll see more and more linkages between the bottom-up nationalistic discourse promoted through various social media channels and the more top-down, you know, media coverage in China.
So, while all these strategies have been somewhat sophisticated and some would argue also successful to an extent, I would also say that they create certain spaces or cracks for more critical reporting and more creative resistance online. So even though it’s aimed at propaganda, it also creates new platforms, new plateaus for creative dissent, but not so much a radical dissent. It’s something that I also discuss in the book. It’s very subtle. It’s very much working in a dance with the party as opposed to something that goes against the party state itself. So it’s not dissidents. There are various creative voices that appear in traditional media and social media.

And traditional media, as an example of how propaganda opened up the spaces, Pengpai as I mentioned in the paper, it’s become credible precisely because of its reporting, right, these more serious journalistic standards, and it’s investigated quite a few serious cases from the Tianjin blast to the kindergarten scandal. Many of you have heard about the abuse, the sexual abuse of one of the largest kindergarten companies in China. It’s been covered by not only Pengpai, but a number of other media. So some outlets like Pengpai pushes other outlets to also engage, to compete, and to create more exciting content because they want to stay alive. They want to attract audiences.

So, despite this talk of complete death of investigative reporting, I would argue that the pockets are still there. There are still some people trying to practice it, very cautiously. And precisely because platforms need legitimacy, they often take advantage of that and create more exciting content as a way to sell legitimacy, essentially.

And in addition, outside of these mainstream kind of traditional media channels, we see other voices that compete with traditional media. For example, the nonfiction writing boom, something that never pays. I think in the West you cannot really make much money as a nonfiction writer online, but in China some of these actors have actually gotten quite rich, and have set up their own startups that encourage various people to write stories and to get tipped by the readers. You can get money back and you can write more stories. So it’s a very interesting sort of new trend.

But the most important part about it is they’re essentially human interest in-depth stories. So they’re not reports in a journalistic style, but they tackle various social issues that journalists used to tackle. And many of the same actors are present on those platforms. The same journalists who used to work for Southern Weekly and other liberal outlets have now transformed their writing into this nonfiction style. So they are another kind of littler glimmer, I guess, of hope when it comes to creativity in a more challenging environment, and it’s precisely afforded by social media.

So, in addition to that, of course, we see satire. The satire itself is not dead. You know, media activism in China is still there when it comes to social media. Here is a glimpse of that on the – on the left: people, indoctrination, you know, rats watching President Xi’s speech. It was a very fun meme that went all viral. And here on the right, you just see these, you know, little kids quietly watching the speech as well. And, of course, that went pretty viral as well. And, of course, the famous Jiang Zemin yawning was a big meme, right, the idea that even the highest leader is a little bit bored or tired or whatever the interpretation, maybe just getting old – (laughter) – depending on one’s point of view. But the meme went very, very quickly viral, and of course it’s about how people comment on it. So even though it might not mean much to us, the way that they comment, the creative comments they’ve used, suggest that there is a lot of, you know, playfulness. In response to this increasing emphasis on one leader, there’s kind of a pushback. Because, like, this is a little bit too much, so let’s play around with this. Let’s create new ways of dealing with this sort of movement, propaganda movement.
So this, of course, gets censored, so it’s not that they’ll stay alive forever. They get censored eventually. But just the glimpse of that is fun, and they stay alive in people’s consciousness, right? They create new ones once these get censored. So it’s something of a cat-and-mouse game that we’ve seen over the years. It’s nothing new, but it’s still there even in this more censored media environment.

And even the globalization of propaganda has created new, fascinating spaces for providing alternative discourse when it comes to China’s role in the world. So this last slide here, it’s a company called Shiziyasho (ph) China Global. That’s a part of Tsaiseen (ph), so Tsaiseen (ph) Magazine. It’s a startup within in that’s run by Michael Anti, a very liberal intellectual. I think many of you may have heard of him. But he started this app essentially hiring a lot of Chinese exchange students. They are working as freelancers. They are paid something – from about $200 and up depending on the story – to write about various things that they see in the countries where they’re living. And they have a huge network, a web that expands to countries like North Korea, Iran, Russia. Basically, they’re all over the world. And they have these pockets, you know, of students who are willing to write, because it’s pretty good income and they get publicity from it.

So it’s been quite successful. And as Michael Anti himself mentioned to me last summer, is that traditional kind of media space, reporting Chinese politics, Chinese citizens have obviously shrunk. It’s become harder to do this kind of work. But when it comes to reporting the world to China, it’s a new opportunity and it’s much less sensitive because it’s not directly speaking about China. But the kind of issues they’re reporting on includes, for example, in this picture, access to internet in Iran – like in sensitive regimes, you know, how do you access internet in their spaces? It’s not about China, but it’s about other countries.

You know, how does one survive? What kind of protests take place in various context. And of course, many of those global issues are very sensitive for traditional media to tackle. So I think it’s a really fascinating new movement. I don’t know how long it’s going to last, but their web is really large. They’re growing, and many students are joining. They have a huge database, and they can tap into any student at any time and ask them to write a story. So it’s almost like a media enterprising company, but it’s run on exchange students. So interesting movement.

And even the English-speaking outlets – for example Stigstone (ph), that many of you might be familiar with out of Shanghai, it’s part of the same group as Pengpai – they have been writing not directly controversial stories, but very interesting investigative in-depth reports about various human-interest issues. For example, the health care industry. There was a big report on oversized hospital that won an award in 2017 for best explanatory reporting. Of course, these stories are in English, so they’re not aimed at Chinese audiences, per se. But most savvy netizens can read English. And if one is really interested, they can always access, I think, those articles. It’s not that hard for them to read it if they want to.

So, as you see, all of these tactics of propaganda, kind of improvisation, they’re all sophisticated. And I think, you know, they’re responding to the digital age, but there is also digital culture, and media professionals that respond to those tactics. So it’s a constant dance that we notice back and forth, the dance that I refer to in my book as guarded improvisation. It’s always guarded by the state, but there’s always movement and fluidity when it comes to these media politics and the relationship between society and the state in managing those media spaces.

So I’ll conclude there. And if you have any questions, I’m happy to discuss any of this, including censorship. Thank you. (Applause.)
MR. JOHNSON: Thank, Maria, that was fascinating.

Lots there, Kaiser, absolutely. (Laughter.) I welcome your commentary before we have a few questions.

KAISER KUO: Yeah, I’m afraid those of you who are maybe hoping for a lively sparring match here are going to be sorely, sorely disappointed, because there’s basically no daylight between Maria’s very empirically grounded and very nuanced and very well-thought-through approach and my purely anecdotal and impressionistic view. But it really accords very much with what I understand.

But I think that we would be remiss here if we only stayed on this topic of strategies – media strategies in the Xi Jinping era, and didn’t look at some of the work on which this is founded, which Maria has been – I spent the last couple days very much steeped in here very impressive body of work, especially her book. And a forthcoming article – I’m sorry, what’s the title of the article is going to be? It’s looking actually at the Chinese and Russian –

MS. REPNIKOVA: It’s “Contesting Authoritarianism: Critical Journalism in China and Russia.” So it’s comparing the two.

MR. KUO: Right. But the work that I’m referring to is really about what are the core ways in which critical journalists and officialdom – critical journalists and the state interact? And I think that you developed this idea very much sort of in reaction a kind of tired narrative that you heard again and again, which focuses on, of course, the more obvious tools of media policy in China, which of course are censorship and propaganda. And we look at some of these things here in the style of propaganda. But the other piece of this, which I think is just – really I think advances our understanding of the relationship between media – and the role of media, really – of critical media in China – is something we should be talking about, right? And that is something you describe as kind of a fluid collaboration.

And before I let you tell us all about it, it is astonishing to me how it not just dovetails – I mean, it corresponds so perfectly with these ideas that I had been sort of developing all along, since my early days of graduate school. And I’m wondering, if your ideas – you think those are sort of extendable beyond just critical journalists to the critical intelligentsia more broadly, or even just the intelligentsia more broadly, and its relationship with state power, because I’ve always believed that that relationship is the engine of history – even of politics but of history, the relationship between the pen and the sword, between the state and intellectuals.

So tell us about this idea of fluid collaboration. What do you mean by this? And maybe give us some examples of how this works in action.

MS. REPNIKOVA: Sure. Thank you, Kaiser.

So the idea of fluid collaboration, it speaks to a little bit towards the end of the presentation, when I talked about the various spaces or cracks in the system that allow for some more critical, more alternative frames to come out in Chinese media discourse. So what I looked at in the book is that I looked at critical journalists more broadly and I saw a number of media outlets that engage primarily in investigative journalism, but also in-depth reporting on contentious social issues over the past decades.
And when I looked at their relationship with the state, the dominant framework that we’ve heard a lot—you know, through Western media reporting, but also through the analysis of kind of intellectuals versus the state, relations in authoritarian regimes—is often that of a battle, you know, the kind of—

MR. KUO: Opposition, yeah.

MS. REPNIKOVA: Opposition. They contest each other and they go after each other. That’s the kind of relationship that we hear about. And we often glorify individuals who do go into that battle, right, the individuals who completely take on the state. So we often hear about Ai Weiwei or, you know, other actors who are really almost fearless. You know, they’re very brave. They’re fearless. They’re going after the top agents of the party.

But what happens for the most part, the majority of that sort of space of the battle takes place in more of the corners of the party state, right, on kind of the edges of it. And I was interested in the edges. I was interested in what’s happening on those edges. Are those individuals equally anti-party, or are they trying to do something different? Do they believe in a battle head-on against the party? (Inaudible.) You know, I was wondering how they work out their strategies and how the state also does and does not tolerate them, and why.

So what I found is that, in addition to this dominant role that I’ve highlighted today, the dominant role of propaganda, there’s been a role called supervision through public opinion called gilunsea (ph)—I’m doing Chinese—that has been tolerant of some voices that end up helping policymaking by highlighting grievances from below, in addition to disciplining local officials. As we all know, it’s a huge struggle for central state but any really, you know, decentralized regime to discipline local authorities.

So, because of these struggles, the regime has granted some of those spaces and roles for journalists to help out, essentially. But they still have to serve the party’s interest. So you can only help out in certain areas, at certain times, under certain limits. That’s not something—

MR. KUO: And it’s very tiered, right?

MS. REPNIKOVA: It’s very tiered.

MR. KUO: I mean, we’re talking about how this is very much allowable when the targets are in the—

MS. REPNIKOVA: Local level.

MR. KUO:– local, right, the local—the sub-provincial level politically.

MS. REPNIKOVA: Right.

MR. KUO: And then the space is narrowed as you approach the apex, as you approach the—and I was noticing this, I mean, as you were talking about the copycats of Pengpai—

MS. REPNIKOVA: Yeah.
MR. KUO: – of the paper, how these were all local and they were all shuttered. But Pengpai, which is central, which is directed at the center, has been allowed to flourish and has been allowed to do some fairly aggressive investigative reporting. So do you think that really accords with your idea, right, there?

MS. REPNIKOVA: So, I mean, Pengpai is also considered to be local in the sense that it’s a regional outlet. So it’s based out of Shanghai. And it’s sponsored by Shanghai authority, so it’s not something that’s funded directly by Beijing. It’s not a central media outlet. And all the other –

MR. KUO: More central, though, to the municipality.

MS. REPNIKOVA: It’s more central than the tiny, localized ones that, you know, you’ve seen the copycats of. So I think the reason for Shanghai to emerge is this kind of center for media sort of, I guess, critical media or more in-depth, interesting media environment, because it used to be very conservative media capital. And then once Nanfang Media, Southern Weekly, right – a lot of you have heard of the south as being more liberal – that space has died out for the most part. The media group has really been shrinking.

So when the space opened up – and we’ve heard about all those speeches of revitalizing online propaganda, creating new voices that Xi Jinping has made – Shanghai really took advantage of that. Shanghai party officials, propaganda officials, said let’s make that the center. Let’s invest here; it’s a good idea. And they’ve done well, and they’re been rewarded for it. So, as a result, Shanghai has become quite powerful. And because of the idea of consuming news only through various apps – you can only read so many information channels – those little, you know, actors, they couldn’t really make it. It’s very hard to attract audiences outside of your little pocket of people in your particular county or town. So Pengpai kind of took over. And I think it’s very difficult to just kind of counter that in the long term.

MR. KUO: So, Maria, the work that you did for your book focuses on basically the Hu Jintao era, right, from 2003 until about 2012, right?

MS. REPNIKOVA: Yeah, but I’ve done follow-up interviews every year.

MR. KUO: Sure.

MS. REPNIKOVA: So I do have a sense of where things went –

MR. KUO: Right, right, right.

MS. REPNIKOVA: – in the past several years, yeah.

MR. KUO: It’s interesting that that period also really sort of correspondents with the explosion of the internet, right? I mean, if I’m remembering correctly, in, say, 2002, on the eve of Hu Jintao’s actually assuming the presidency, the internet penetration level in China was probably under 10 percent still. I mean, we were still talking about just less – I mean, maybe double-digit millions, right? By 2012, I think we had passed 650 million. So we’re talking about internet penetration approaching 50 percent in China, which is really just an absolute change.
The internet allows more directly targeted segmentation, so the party’s able to push its message more specifically at certain groups. But at the same time, it creates a lot of transparency of permeability, where I can see the messaging that’s aimed at segments that I do not belong to. And so this seems sort of a double-edged thing.

Is it more or less effective at compartmentalizing its message and focusing, because what you want to say to the unwashed masses is not the same as you want to say to the educated urban elites. What you want to say to Chinese who have a lot of exposure to the outside world and to people who are sort of more internally focused, your message to the outside and your message domestically, your (native ?) message and your external party – outside, extra-party message is different. How’s the internet – a huge question, but how’s the internet just –

MS. REPNIKOVA: Yeah. Well, I think that part of it is not so much playing to different audiences kind of separately, but multiplying the platforms. So instead of having one voice or having just a few newspapers and a TV channel, now we have all sorts of those platforms that I talked about today, but there are many more. So in – essentially, there’s more choice. And the idea is to kind of cater to different audiences. So if you’re a particular member of a certain group, you’re not going to go to the other paper. You’re not going to read, you know Renmin Ribao. You’re reading Pengpai first, so you’re going to stick to Pengpai.

So in this case, you’re going to consume that information. But if you’re reading Renmin Ribao, you’re going to read about lingxiu and all those other slogans as well, and you’re going to get attracted by that message. And if you’re a younger person who’s just consuming those apps and is interested in, you know, the vouchers for apple picking or Kindles, et cetera, then you’re not going to be probably reading Pengpai as much. You might be reading that – you know, the stories on those apps.

MR. KUO: It’s so shameful that Chinese people would stay within their own little media bubble. (Laughter.)

MS. REPNIKOVA: Well, we all do that.

MR. KUO: That’s the joke.

MS. REPNIKOVA: Yeah. It’s kind of – yeah. It’s an expectation. I think in some ways it makes it a little bit easier, because if you create more, you might be able to kind of reach out to more voices. But I guess the downside of that is that you’re not quite sure, you know, necessarily who you’re capturing. So there’s a lot of, you know, discussion. Is this successful? Is this effective? And what else can be done? So it’s not the – it’s not a final note.

MR. KUO: I think there’s probably a lot of people who have read your work, your book, and said: Yes, you know, this perfectly well describes media during the Hu Jintao era, where we really saw quite a bit of contestation. It’s was quite clear. I mean, there were a lot of examples that you looked out in the book. For example, the series of mining disasters in the mid-2000s in Henan, in Shanxi, in Liaoning. And then I think the Wenchuan in 2008 was another big case study. But they would probably imagine – and correctly maybe – that the space for contestation has constricted really appreciably since 2013, and really since 2009 – since the illiberal turn really began in 2009. But you don’t really say that that’s the case, right? You say that the mechanisms are still – they still hold, yeah?
MS. REPNIKOVA: Yeah. I mean, the spaces have shrunk. So the number of actors engaged in this sort of activities – you know, the number of media professionals willing to go into in-depth reporting, investigative reporting, has definitely decreased. So not everybody’s as daring or willing to enter this kind of job. But at the same time, there’s still people who are. And the younger generations don’t have the same exposure to previous era. So they don’t know what happened before. So to them, this is just what it is. If you want to be a journalist, you have certain restrictions and you just have to try harder and find new creative ways.

So last summer I was interviewing journalists who are 19, 20 years old. You know, they are just starting this career. And they’re still excited and they’re still somewhat idealistic. You know, how long that lasts is a question perhaps of time. But they’re getting even more savvy in also trying to understand how official propaganda works and trying to tackle it back and forth. So, yeah, it’s a matter of actors, but also new platforms that I mentioned before. There are many different ways to express critique that are not always as obvious to us, or not always linked to investigative journalism.

MR. KUO: So some of the features of this mode of collaboration that I thought were really interesting was, one, that, well, these critical journalists still see themselves as insiders. They see themselves as part of the system. They see their contributions as intended to improve governance. That they believe that they have this shared idea of improving governance through what you call public opinion oversight. So what about – so do they really see themselves as required, as you suggest, to contribute positive, like, sort of solutions, right? You suggest that they – there’s this expectation that in their – I mean, I see this. It is a feature, absolutely, of Chinese investigative reporting, that you don’t feel like the story is over until they’ve given you six bullet points of things that can actually be done to

MS. REPNIKOVA: Yeah.

MR. KUO: What is – how do they expect, you know, a 24-year-old reporter to come up with solutions that an enormous technocratic bureaucracy can’t come up with? I mean, why lay this expectation at the – and, I mean, I’m tempted to think that it isn’t sincere. That, in fact, what you’re asking for is for the journalists to signal participation, to signal alignment, to signal acquiescence. Is that a fair read on that?

MS. REPNIKOVA: Yeah. I mean, the term that they use is constructive reporting, which is a very fluid term as well – you know, what does it mean to be constructive. And there are several ways in which constructiveness is expressed in media reporting. One way is, indeed, to provide solutions. But where do the solutions come from? They come from official voices and experts.

So you see a lot of expert interviews. So when it comes to coal mining, for instance, in the past decade Tsaiseen (ph) Magazine did a lot of investigations, and they suggested that the coal mining sector should be commercialized. Where did they get this kind of advice from? The one official. (Laughter.) The ministry was interested in that. He had one agenda, and this official was quoted constantly. So I found this guy later on and I interviewed him, but he changed his mind. (Laughter.) He was no longer supporting the agenda of Tsaiseen (ph).

But it was just interesting how this particular name appeared because they couldn’t say it themselves, you know. They couldn’t directly say we suggest this, because it sounds, you know, too sensitive and too blatant. So that’s – one way is to provide this kind of through expert solutions. But the other way is to suggest that the government is already taking care of it. So a lot of Chinese reports,
if you read them, including more critical reports, they start out with what’s already being done to fix the problem, and that’s something that’s quite distinct from Western reporting. Like, you’re not going to see what’s being fixed yet until things are maybe underway and maybe weeks later, right? So that’s kind of a different strategy of sort of appealing to the state. It’s, like, you’re already taking care of it, but these are things they could do more of. So it’s sort of, again, a very collaborative subtle way to present critique.

MR. KUO: Let’s talk about the case of “Qiúndíng Zhī Xià,” “Under the Dome,” this documentary that was done by an ex-CCTV investigative journalist herself.

MS. REPNIKOVA: Mmm hmm. Yeah, Chai Jing.

MR. KUO: Right, who did this very hard-hitting documentary that was seen by probably upwards of 70 million people in China before it was suddenly taken offline. So walk us through how this is an example. I think – I mean, it fits pretty well into how this actually works.

MS. REPNIKOVA: Yeah.

MR. KUO: I mean, because she, clearly, had collaboration. I mean, there were, you know, MEP officials who appeared on camera and –

MS. REPNIKOVA: Yeah. So she’s a fascinating example also because she was a journalist and a producer before, and she’s extremely well-read, and I’ve interviewed her in the book quite a bit as well. But in this particular case, the way it was done is that she appealed to a policy area that was already of interest to officials. So environmental issues are of high relevance to Chinese state. Of course, so there were many statements made before her film came out. But yes, if you watch the film, it’s almost like a film that walks you through various attempts and voices from the policy apparatus as well. So she’s not just presenting a story of grievance. She’s presenting a personal story of her own daughter being born with a, you know, potential illness, I think, and how –

MR. KUO: That may or may not have been related to pollution, right.

MS. REPNIKOVA: – yeah, related to pollution. But also then she goes into these expert accounts from various locales and ministries to suggest that things should be done better, and how and why they’re not, and what’s being done about it. So it’s very much, again, the constructive critique here, approach that appeared in her film. And the response by the state, I think, really mirrors a lot of responses observed in other cases. On the one hand, the film was censored, right –

MR. KUO: Right.

MS. REPNIKOVA: – and harshly so. You can no longer watch the film. On the other hand, there’s been more policy statements and response to the issue since the film came out. So is it linked directly to the film? Of course, we can’t, you know, trace the causality directly. But the idea is that it raised sort of issues. It’s, obviously, part of the public conscience. They have to do something about it. So censorship and responsiveness are almost linked together when it comes to engaging with any sensitive matters and reporting in China, (especially ?) pollution.

MR. KUO: I also felt like, yeah, the timing of the censorship was – seemed carefully calibrated to me, that they allowed it to reach a certain number of people and they understood, you know, who it
would reach first and, you know, what stakeholders it would actually touch first before they pulled it. And it was – it seemed to me quite – yeah, and that’s your sense as well?

MS. REPNIKOVA: Well, I think it’s also trying to wait out and understand the public response. So in many of these cases, when a certain report is published it’s not immediately censored. But the idea is to wait and see who is responding to it –

MR. KUO: Right, mmm hmm.

MS. REPNIKOVA: – and how the people react because there’s an obsession with studying public opinion in China, right? They are studying it vigorously. So the idea of understanding, you know, who is responding to what helps them better craft a response to this message.

So censorship will still happen. There is no way about it – you know, around it. They’re always going to censor a sensitive message. But they might do it sooner or later. There might be a day or hours or maybe even two days, in some cases, for a sensitive report to stay on.

MR. KUO: So you were born in Latvia and spent a lot of your childhood in another CIS state in – well, I guess Latvia was never a CIS state, though?

MS. REPNIKOVA: It was part of the Soviet Union.

MR. KUO: It was part of the Soviet Union, right. But in Kyrgyz – right, in Kyrgyzstan. You’re a native Russian speaker as well. So you actually, in your book, and I think this is really fascinating, you did quite a bit of contrast between Russian – you looked at both Russia in the period of Glasnost and then you looked at Russia in the Putin era, and found that maybe during Gorbachev’s lifetime there was still this sort of collaboration – this fluid collaboration pattern. They were participants in the dance along with the state. But it’s very much not that way now, right?

MS. REPNIKOVA: Right. It’s not at all.

MR. KUO: I mean, Navalny was just arrested yesterday and –

MS. REPNIKOVA: Right. In Russia, we see – we more of that battlefield, so to speak, the two opposition forces, you know, coming together. So the voices that are most critical that are still, you know, residing in Russia tend to be far more critical than the Chinese voices in China. So the interviews that I’ve conducted with those investigative reporters, they don’t have an idea of improving governance, necessarily, or collaborating with the party, or in this case, Putin, or becoming, you know, allies of the state. Their idea is really to contribute to some radical change over time, and the sooner the better. So it’s a very different vision from the Chinese reporters, and it’s a different vision from the Soviet journalists, as well, as you mentioned.

MR. KUO: So in Gorbachev’s time, he – you know, I think you suggest in your book that he invested them with so much power that they actually overwhelmed the state.

MS. REPNIKOVA: Right. So he invested them with a lot of power, but also fewer restrictions, so one of the ways to manage this relationship, of course, is to constantly adapt your restrictive mechanisms, as well.
So I talked today about propaganda, and you all heard too much about censorship so I cut that a little bit short, but there is – there is constant re-adaptation of control and different pressures on journalists to keep them in check. In the Soviet period it was almost like the doors opened up and the pressures have really laid off to the point that they were able to say many radical things that they weren’t able to say for decades. So it was a very different dynamic, and I think the Soviet model has been a lesson for China, obsessively studying the Soviet Union –

MR. KUO: Yeah, absolutely. Yeah.

MS. REPNIKOVA: – as a non-model, an anti-model, so to speak.

MR. JOHNSON: Can we just follow up on that? Because I think it’s very critical.

MS. REPNIKOVA: Yes.

MR. JOHNSON: One thing that strikes me in watching this dance – (laughter) – over some number of years –

MS. REPNIKOVA: Yes.

MR. JOHNSON: – is – let’s call it the genius of the party’s – Chinese Communist Party’s solution to a lot of this has been to understand the evolution from information control – which I think they quickly realized had real limits, especially in an internet age – to, let’s call it, you know, sort of persuasion to what I would call now information shaping. In other words, the party seeks to create a narrative before there is a narrative – (laughter) –

MS. REPNIKOVA: Right.

MR. JOHNSON: – and then push it out among all these platforms that you’ve highlighted.

We don’t have to like it, but it is effective, I think. Can you comment on your sense of the evolution of that process?

MS. REPNIKOVA: How effective it is?

MR. JOHNSON: Right, how effective but also how it developed. When did the light go on for them to make that shift?

MS. REPNIKOVA: To start thinking about sort of the battle for the public opinion?

MR. JOHNSON: Right.

MR. KUO: Right.

MS. REPNIKOVA: I think the lights went out quite a while ago. It’s not just the internet age – even looking at the Hu Jintao era, you know, starting out, but early in the Hu Jintao era, researching the subject, there was always the discussion that we have to capture and sort of charm public opinion. It was never about just control. There was always this idea that we have to understand public opinion first and then we have to try to understand how to align the public with our interests and to work
together. And that’s something that, I think, you don’t see as close up in the Russian case under Putin – this obsessive kind of trying – attempt to understand public opinion to really cater to it in some ways.

So I think that’s a very interesting feature of the Chinese Communist system and Chinese political system as well. So that started earlier, but I think the internet was almost like a real red light. It’s like we really have to do something more innovative. And that light has come off sort of late in the Hu era, but Xi Jinping has understood the challenge more acutely, and he has been doing more about it. He has been more sharp in proclaiming, you know, and making various statements to essentially stimulate these movements, these platforms and individuals to become more creative in pursuing, shaping and channeling public opinion.

MR KUO: The media is surnamed party under Xi.

I remember back in the time when, you know – this would be year two, year three of the Weibo age where you couldn’t go a week without seeing some high-flying public official brought low in – by his malfeasance – always he, never her – captured on – by a clever netizen with a camera at the right time. You know, the guy with the watch, for example –

MS. REPNIKOVA: Right.

MR. KUO: – the brother with the watch. (Laughter.) Right. There were all sorts of, you know, cases like that. There was – anyway, that – those days seem to be gone. There is not as much willingness, I think, or responsiveness to that kind of ground-up, internet-based public oversight – public oversight.

MS. REPNIKOVA: Yeah.

MR. KUO: What’s the space look like now? How constricted is it? I mean, are there still – what are the no-fly zones that have been – there’ve always been no-fly zones. They’ve – you weren’t able to do Taiwan independence, or Tibetan independence or Xinjiang – or – of course, nobody – nothing calling for, you know, plural – pluralist elections.

MS. REPNIKOVA: Right.

MR. KUO: What are the new no-fly zones?

MS. REPNIKOVA: Well, I just wanted to make one point before I get to the no-fly zones. The idea of anti-corruption, the sort of watch dog by the public versus watch dog by the state, so the anti-corruption campaign in some ways replaced I think those pictures and Weibo posts. And essentially it’s more of a top-down battle, but it also engages societal voices, so what we see is media being invited to help – that’s their own phrasing – to essentially investigate officials that are already under investigation or under – (laughter) – you know, certain oversight by the party. So instead of them being the first to get the story, the scoop, they’re the ones helping to expand the scoop, if that makes sense –

MR. KUO: Well, it’s more just like here’s some red meat, right? Go dig it out.

MS. REPNIKOVA: Well, here’s – they give them a little bit, you know, but they’ve never been able to, you know, do this kind of work before. It’s pretty exciting for some people, even though they
know it’s a game and it’s not something that’s really as genuine as they would like it to be. But I think it’s interesting how this anti-corruption kind of struggle has moved more away from this bottom-up to more of a top-down orchestrated campaign that still involves society but in a more kind of manufactured manner.

MR. JOHNSON: I think it’s important, too, to highlight the levels, if you will –

MS. REPNIKOVA: Yeah.

MR. JOHNSON: – up and down that line of communication. So, clearly, you had, I think, an episode probably in 2013-14, right after the campaign largely got kicked off, where really central discipline inspection people were starting to say to the leadership I think we better run this – (laughs) – you know, we better control it.

MS. REPNIKOVA: Yeah.

MR. JOHNSON: And then you have clear instances where Wang Qishan takes the case file and hands it to Hu Shuli and says go run this story for me. And then that percolates down to what you were saying, for people to go out and turn over more rocks, if you will.

MS. REPNIKOVA: Right.

MR. JOHNSON: Which is a pretty sophisticated approach, really. So it is sort of, like everything else, a top-level design it seems to me – (laughs) – the theme.

MS. REPNIKOVA: Yeah, top-level design. And there’s a new app I was reading about yesterday where people are encouraged to not spy, but kind of surveil, you know, neighbors and their communities, and then they get tipped for it. It’s kind of like – it’s a higher tip than for (citizen ?) armies. It’s like higher than Hu Madong (ph) or something else.

So it’s interesting. It’s almost like similar ideas; like, well, you can do the surveillance, you can look around, but you’re going to report to us. So this doesn’t just go to – (inaudible) – it goes to a particular channel that’s controlled by the state.

MR. JOHNSON: Right, to the right filter.

MS. REPNIKOVA: Exactly, the right filter.

MR. JOHNSON: Yeah.

MS. REPNIKOVA: So it’s an interesting, kind of a more controlled, maybe in some ways more sophisticated way of encouraging people to do that work.

MR. KUO: You’re probably familiar with Danie Stockmann –

MS. REPNIKOVA: Yes.

MR. KUO: – and the work that she’s done. She’s at Leiden, right?
MS. REPNIKOVA: Yeah, she’s –

MR. KUO: Is that correct?

MS. REPNIKOVA: I think she’s in Berlin now.

MR. KUO: Oh, she’s in Berlin now? OK. She’s looked at the impact of commercialization of media. Is this part of the work that you’ve done, that you’ve looked at maybe in this area? We’ve seen a reduction in commercial media. It’s quite pronounced. Some of it has been for commercial reasons, I mean, as the rest of the world has suffered; some of it is not. How has this played into conscription in the space available to critical media?

MS. REPNIKOVA: So my work in the book, it builds sort of on her work because she discovered that commercialized media has been more – generally, a little bit more open. But at the same time, I think she argued that the general line or sort of argument or the kind of general lines they pursue are a lot different. So it’s almost like you have these more commercialized outlets that look more liberal, but they’re actually not that much better or more credible than the party outlets. But people prefer to look at them.

So in some ways, we see some of it playing out now –

MR. KUO: Pengpai.

MS. REPNIKOVA: – in a sort of a reverse way. So you see Pengpai, it’s a state-owned outlet, but it looks commercialized. So they adopt kind of the façade, the image of a commercialized outfit, but they’re funding it with official money. So I think there’s still this kind of idea of playing into that desire for an alternative product, which happens to be more commercialized.

MR. KUO: Right.

MR. JOHNSON: I think you see that, too, with the advent of the sort of Xi Jinping fanboy site as well.

MS. REPNIKOVA: Yeah.

MR. JOHNSON: Which is, of course, all staged by the propaganda department of the party.

MS. REPNIKOVA: Exactly, but it looks like it’s something else.

MR. JOHNSON: Correct.

MS. REPNIKOVA: They tried it with different names and –

MR. JOHNSON: Yeah, so –

MS. REPNIKOVA: – just stay away from the official media kind of interpretation of bias.

MR. JOHNSON: Right.
MR. KUO: Should we take some questions?

MR. JOHNSON: Yes. Why don’t we turn to our audience? And as usual, per CSIS practice, please wait to be called on and then do identify yourself and do try to confine your question to a question. We’re going to start right up front here.

Microphones?

Q: Hi. I’m Chen Weihua, China Daily.

So since I’m – I think I’m implicated in your talks – (laughter) – I would make a very quick comment. I think, you know, as you mentioned also, I mean, it’s easier, I mean, for people to dismiss Chinese news media as propaganda. But, you know, as you touched on, I mean, it’s interesting. I mean, people talk about the Chinese economy as predatory, but – (inaudible) – Florida actually say Chinese economy is not a predator. I think he’s a very honest scholar, you know commenting.

I mean, China has – I think that the China media landscape is far more complicated. What you discussed has been there for decades I would say. So that’s only maybe, I don’t know, 1 percent, 10 percent of picture. It’s not like, you know, people believe everybody in this town wakes up, wants to know the Russian investigation or whole America wants to know that. No. They want to know NBA, NFL or other, and the Chinese, too. Ninety percent or maybe more of people want to wake up to know what’s happening to the housing crisis, the medical care, other, education, not, you know, what you just referred to. So that’s the larger picture I want to say.

I would also, you know, want to say, I mean, a lot of people you mentioned – you know, I’m from Shanghai. So those people, the leaders there, are my fellow schoolmates, the students – (inaudible). So I know them well, very well. They are very professional journalists and professional, you know, people you find here. So I have a lot of respect for them.

And, you know, the other thing is, I think – you know, I think the Chinese media obviously has its own problems. I mean, us – I mean, but the U.S. media is the same. I mean, I just want to raise one example. I don’t know if you read the recent article by Kwas (ph) about China Daily fabricating these, you know, quotes by Davos mayor, you know, about – it turned to be false news. I mean, I have actually, you know, commented from the Davos mayor’s office, because the Davos mayor was speaking German and his aide translated into English. So our reporter did reporting based on the English version, and it was totally accurate. So the mayor now sent a letter, say your reporting is totally professional, in no way fabricated anything. It’s not fake news. It’s only technical, you know, a little difference. It’s not altered the meaning.

But this was news reported in – you know, ran by CBS, AP, probably, VOA, other news organizations. So the U.S. news media is powerful. But, you know, I mean, that’s no doubt. I mean, the Chinese media is new. I mean, it’s a learning process. I’m not trying to defend it.

MR. JOHNSON: What’s your – get to the question.

Q: Yeah. The question is really, you know, because I could make the same argument whether the U.S. news – the U.S. government is just more skillful in shaping propaganda, you know, than the Chinese government. So that’s the only difference.
MS. REPNIKOVA: So it’s the question?

Q: Yeah. That’s the question.

MS. REPNIKOVA: All right. Should I answer?

MR. KUO: Which is the more skillful?

MS. REPNIKOVA: OK. I mean, first of all, I wanted to respond to your point very briefly in terms of the 10 percent or the full picture. Of course, the picture is much more diverse, right. There are many, many outlets. There are many more platforms than this. This was kind of a snippet of just different adaptations, I would say, that I highlighted in my research about state adaptation. So I’m not looking at all commercial products.

But, of course, as you say, most people are interested in their local news or entertainment or housing prices and practical issues. And I think a lot of those platforms play into that interest, because a lot of these outlet(s) is not that political. A lot of it actually speaks to everyday concerns of Chinese citizens. And I think that’s a smart strategy of persuasion, if you will. Whatever word you call it, that’s what is being done also by official media platforms; the idea of, you know, adjusting themselves to public demands for, yeah, everyday concerns; and the idea of propaganda in the U.S. being more sophisticated.

The words we use – and we have to be, of course, careful with them – but I think what’s happening with every government, they use various persuasion strategies. And what I described here is not necessarily very Chinese or authoritarian. That’s what I mentioned at the beginning, that many countries use digital media platforms. They use direct interactive features and creative content.

So I think the difference is that there’s a lot more state investment into these platforms in China and a lot more money that’s funded by the states, and there is more control of the platforms themselves, right. So there’s less diversity when it comes to different ownership structures.

But as far as goals are concerned or, you know, influencing the message, of course, every government wants to influence the message through various strategic tools. So in that sense, you know, I agree with you.

MR. KUO: But, you know, she didn’t set out to offer a comprehensive picture of the entire Chinese media landscape. That’s not what we asked her to do, and that’s not what her book sets out to do. It’s to look at media – the relationship specifically between critical journalism and the state media. And I think she presents a far more nuanced picture in her reporting than what you would typically encounter in the Western media that you’re so quick to condemn.

MR. JOHNSON: Next question. Yes, ma’am.

Q: Hi. Thank you very much. It’s fascinating. Thank you.

And Mr. Kuo, I read many of your articles in That’s Beijing, and thank you for those – in the old days.

MR. KUO: (Laughs.)
Q: I’m Ruth Kurzbauer, retired U.S. diplomat; served various decades in China. And I was a junior press office in ’84 when we were mimeographing our limited press statements; and I must say, the Chinese media outreach much more sophisticated than we were then.

But my question is more on the new media that I’m less familiar with. For the journalists that are writing for the various apps you explained to us, are these freelancers? Do they propose their own stories? How do they know what the app wants? What happens if maybe the story is not what the editor hoped for? Are there any repercussions? So that’s one little sort of nuts-and-bolts question.

And the second is, I was on just a temporary duty in China a few months ago, and at night I would relax and I would watch television, old media. And I always enjoyed the various telenovela – what’s the English word? – soap operas, especially the historical ones; but the historical ones, not the old ancient ones but, you know, the Second World War preview or before. There was always a message. And I was wondering, are those still popular tools? Or is this old media that only appeals to people over 60, like me? (Laughter.)

MS. REPNIKOVA: So great question about the first one about the process, I guess, of making those digital apps, you know, who works there and how it works. These are not freelancers. They actually have contracts. So they’re not just, say, in their homes and freelancing. They come to an office, usually. And the office – the ones I visited, at least, have sort of a startup, like, look to them. It’s more industrial-looking. They’re kind of fashionable. And they don’t look like an official media outlet per se. So – but also official media itself is changing its image, right, there. They look a lot more modern these days.

So they try to improvise their stories, in a sense, to see how audience reacts. So they get more bonuses if the story is very popular or if someone – you know, a story does well, like, for example, that story about Xi Jinping as a class leader, but there are many other little snippets. If they do well, they get a little bit more money and they get more rewarded, right? So they kind of test it out to see how the audience reactions go.

MR. KUO: It’s BuzzFeed.

MS. REPNIKOVA: Yeah, it’s BuzzFeed model. They’re basically BuzzFeed. (Laughs.) Yeah. So it’s very competitive as well. And they’re paid – I don’t know exactly how much, but quite well. And so this job allows for some creativity, but of course there’s editorial influence there as well. So one has to check in with an editor. And depending on, you know, the sensitivity of the subject, it might get caught or it might get adjusted. But there’s a little bit more freedom, I think, than other spaces.

MR. KUO: Right. The conversation isn’t often about content. It’s often about search engine optimization. It’s often – exactly, how – I mean, it’s talking – they will constantly monitor the viral potential of a given story and pull stories very quickly if they don’t appear to moving quickly. Retitle. They’ll A-B test different headlines. They will put them in different locations. They do all sorts of things. I mean, it is entirely, entirely driven – much of it is algorithmic too. There’s a huge industry of people who are – you know, who know how to optimize a search engine – how to optimize content for search engines.

MS. REPNIKOVA: And as for soap operas, maybe you know –
MR. KUO: And for – and for – and for Toutiao, now. So one of the big players is Jinri Toutiao, a company called ByteDance and their product, which is an entirely AI-driven, supposedly, personalize new site, which has just supplanted a lot of news. I mean, they don’t produce news themselves. They aggregate. But they are extremely – everyone is gearing their news so that it will be picked up by Toutiao and pushed to the audience as they look for it.

MR. JOHNSON: Think of what happens here on steroids, basically. (Laughter.)

MS. REPNIKOVA: Yeah, except much faster speed, yeah.

MR. JOHNSON: In the back.

Q: My name is Hong Jian (ph). I previously worked for – (inaudible) – Media, but now I’m a Ph.D. student at George Mason University.

So my question for you, Maria – and, first of all, thank you for your talk. I’m really wondering to what extent you can generalize across the board that the investigative journalists are taking a collaborative approach towards the reporting, that they have this – they are consciously – they are conscious about – they want to prevent their reporting in a more constructive way, like in the examples you raised about having official sponsor of a story or printing a story only when the investigation – the official investigation is underway. Is it really a collaboration? Or is it a tactic for the media to protect themselves? Thank you.

MR. KUO: Is it possible to distinguish between the two, right?

Q: I think it’s possible, because we are talking about how the – how the journalists identify themselves. How they see their roles are. So I – there might be some journalists who think it’s better that we take a more constructive approach, that we help with solution. But also to my knowledge, I think there are also journalists who think their role is to reveal the truth and to really tell people what they need to know, although they need to be careful. They need to be telling these stories, at the same time they need to safe.

MS. REPNIKOVA: Yeah. There is definitely – there is a difference in terms of how people themselves internally, right, view the rules. But just because they want to reveal the truth and that’s their role, doesn’t mean that they end up being opponents of the state in practice, right? So when I look at this issue, I don’t look necessarily their all – their internal kind of – or subconscious, you know, reasoning. I look at also what manifests itself in their work, their writings themselves. What do they end up doing? How far can they go?

So in that group of journalists, you’re right, many of them do seem to identify with almost sometimes idealistic vision of helping the state, right? But some of them don’t. They don’t have that vision. All they want to be is professional journalists. But when you read the actual articles, the reports themselves, and see how far they can test the limits, they still end up staying within that edge, right, of the system. So that’s why I call it collaborative. Not because they necessarily believe or fully endorse the collaboration, especially in private, but because that’s the pragmatic – the decision that they make in terms of surviving in the system.
MR. JOHNSON: I think it’s important to understand as well that, you know, there is this issue of the very vast toolkit the regime can bring to bear on managing this problem. And so, you know, when you have someone – and it’s very deflating. When you have someone like the Nanfang jomo (ph) people basically say: I’m done. This isn’t going to happen anymore. (Laughs.) That’s a very powerful statement for an entity that was at it for such a long time in China.

Next question. Somebody from this side, maybe? Yes, sir. Wait for the mic, please.

Q: Stanley Covere (ph).

This conversation reminds me of my student days in the Soviet Union, OK? The Soviet Union had this sort of propaganda, half control of the Soviet students. My impression is it didn’t work all that well. Worked a little well, I mean, because their information was restricted so they couldn’t be sure. But I was stuck, they didn’t have a very high opinion of the Communist Party, despite all the propaganda. And I’m wondering if something similar might be going on in China. We’re asking – you know, we’re assuming that if they do all this, it had the effect. But has anybody actually gotten some sense of, say, the Chinese students? Because this recalls my own student days in China, how they are affected by this?

MS. REPNIKOVA: Well, the effectiveness is always a tricky thing to measure, right, in terms of how do we see what support is for the party and all of this other propaganda. So I think the first thing to keep in mind is that China is certainly doing much better today than it has been decades ago in terms of its economy, right? Many people are satisfied with the progress that the state has been making. So propaganda alone is not going to work if you don’t have the substance to back it up, right? I think in the late Soviet Union many people were also frustrating with just how the economy was doing what the party was doing in terms of governance.

So when it comes to Chinese state, and they’re very careful to at least try to improve certain areas of governance, but also to grow the economy. And of course, it’s also a tumultuous process. Not all of it is neat. But the idea of a movement is clear. So I think that’s probably why we’re seeing some kind of statistics in terms of support for the party. I mean, the kind of numbers that come out of surveys, at least as far as I’ve read, continue to suggest that there’s critique of local officials but still a fairly high support of, you know, high-level central government, essentially.

How much of it is completely sincere? You know, they’re surveys. So not everybody’s going to answer exactly what they believe to a survey. But there are very few other ways to kind of measure that on a larger scale. So that’s as far as I think we can get in social science to kind of see, you know, how much of the public supports the regime. If you look at students – you know, I’ve looked at the student population. I saw in my research, looking at ideology, how they consumer what they believe in – yes, that very many of them are very critical, very open-minded. They read a lot of Western news content. They’re willing to work abroad. You know, they’re not buying into very specific ideological constructs. They’re not interested in them.

But will they completely take on the party and say: Hey, we’re done with this, we just want to move? Not necessarily. So it’s sort of a – it’s more of an ambiguous, I think, relationship that they have with the – with ideology itself. It’s, like, do we believe in all those slogans? We don’t care. But do we believe that some things are getting better? Yes, we do. So it’s sort of a – it’s a mixed batch. So I think it’s hard to dismiss it as one way or the other. But according to numbers, there’s still a very high support for the central state.
MR. KUO: Yeah, I think it’s kind of ironic that here in the United States, in countries like Australia, the problem with students seem to be their excessive ardent jingoism, their love of Xi Jinping, than the opposite.

MS. REPNIKOVA: Yeah, they get more nationalistic also.

MR. KUO: Right. They seem to –

MR. JOHNSON: It is striking. I mean, I think this is a very important point, you know, the long-cherished notion there that students come here, and they study for in some cases long periods of time, they’re exposed to the true internet, the scales fall from their eyes and they hate their government. It’s just not accurate.

Yeah. You’ve been very patient. Thank you.

Q: Nicolas Romero with Foreign Policy Initiative Future Leaders.

I was – my question relates – well, actually, two parts. One, have we considered, like, the Straussian concept of esoterism, and protecting themselves through somewhat esoteric writing? And then I guess the second point is, in a more confrontational and expansionist Chinese age, I mean, are we – do we consider potentially critical Chinese journalism in an era of Chinese conflict, for instance? How would we see a critical Chinese journalist, perhaps, provide collaborative interaction with the state in a Chinese conflict abroad, or in the near abroad, for instance? Is there – is there room for providing suggestions for how the PLA conducts its activities?

MS. REPNIKOVA: The first question, I don’t completely get the – (inaudible). It probably is about protecting oneself through more ambiguous language or kind of trying to be – yeah, using – if that’s what I understood then, yeah, there’s definitely a lot of that device, if you wish, or attempt being deployed by many journalists. And the vagueness – it’s not only the vagueness, but the use of metaphors, and just oftentimes not very critical language, but sophisticated messaging that reads between the lines. So I think that’s something that, again, you know, going back to the Soviet Union, that was happening quite a bit in the Soviet press. And those who read the Soviet press would find, you know, messages hidden in between the lines, as opposed to just outwardly there.

So if you look at Chinese media – and some studies have done that in quantitative matter – you just say how many negative words come up, right? How many critical words come up? And you look at that, and you probably will find that Renmin Ribao, because they will have the most critical words, because there are certain allowed – you know, tolerated words that are – they are able to publish. But if you look at the more maybe liberal voices, they will not have many critical words in them. They’ll have much more, you know, indirect language. And I think that language takes a while to analyze, but it’s important because it signals to a specific public – not to everybody – maybe different, alternative frames on various issues.

When it comes to the foreign conflict, as far as I know, it’s a very sensitive area. So I think it’s quite hard for journalists – critical journalists to comment on what PLA should or should not be doing. And there are many restrictions –

MR. KUO: It’s one of the no-flys.
MS. REPNIKOVA: It’s a no-fly, yeah. (Laughter.)

But also, in terms of foreign relations themselves, those are set quite highly from the top. So, you know, critiquing how certain policies should go, I think that level of critique hasn’t quite been as active, you know, from my – from my observation.

MR. KUO: Let me sneak one quick question in. We are privy once in a while to what are purported to be editorial directives on, for example, the China Digital Times – almost the Ministry of Truth directives.

MS. REPNIKOVA: Right. Yes.

MR. KUO: Are these accurate, as far as you can tell?

MS. REPNIKOVA: Well, they –

MR. KUO: Do they seem to come – are they well-sourced?

MS. REPNIKOVA: They seem accurate, but they’re kind of like – the gentleman here said in the beginning it’s sort of like one fragment of the picture because they get those leaks from one specific place.

MR. KUO: Sure, right.

MS. REPNIKOVA: So is it accurate about the whole national spectrum? Not necessarily.

MR. KUO: Right. There is no single national directive, yeah.

MS. REPNIKOVA: There’s no single. And one of the things I also argue in the book is that there is a lot of diversity and kind of conflicting signals when it comes to restrictions themselves. And now especially, you know, with – (inaudible) – you know, controlling the media but also with propaganda departments sending different messages, I’ve seen journalists literally receiving different instructions on the same story. So I think it’s accurate to the point that this particular thing is probably true, but then is it accurate as a whole or are there other messages that were missing? That’s another question.

MR. KUO: Yeah. People I know who have worked for internet companies – I’m not saying who have –

MS. REPNIKOVA: Yeah.

MR. KUO: – for example, used to be able to kind of navigate the gaps between what SARFT says and what GAP (ph) say and, you know – (inaudible) – or –

MS. REPNIKOVA: Right. They’re able to – (inaudible).

MR. KUO: Yeah.
MR. JOHNSON: I think that’s probably why you’ve seen some of the efforts at homogenization.

MR. KUO: Right. Right. Right. It’s all come under CAC now and it’s a little bit tougher.

MR. JOHNSON: Right. And just to come back to the PLA question real quickly as well, I think it’s important to understand that, you know, whether the journalists are interested in a topic or not and the sensitivity of it, really, what you have is a situation where there is no Chinese CSIS or Rand Corporation. You know, the PLA maintains a monopoly of expertise on its own endeavors. Sir.

Q: John Holden with the US-China Strong Foundation.

Fascinating discussion. I’m curious if you could say a little bit more about the relation between the center and local governments in terms of the allocation of goods versus critical news – constructively critical, if we prefer – because as we know – as you’ve said, the anti-corruption campaign amongst the people is considered to really need to be – needs to be focused on local officials who are responsible for the vast majority of bad behavior. But so how does the center and the – and localities negotiate, if you will, what they can say about themselves and what could be said about them?

MS. REPNIKOVA: Yeah. It’s a great question, and that tension really also comes out in a lot of these interviews in the work, is that on the one hand, there’s the idea that local officials should be disciplined, right, and it’s a good thing to have the media – you know, media report – reporting on certain corruption cases or local governance failures. But on the other hand, the extent to how much they should be doing that is sort of negotiable, right, because many small scandals become big scandals over a spectrum of hour because of social media. So if something was local before, it was just quickly forgotten. Now it becomes a large scandal just because people are following it. So that makes it sensitive. And, as a result, there’s no more of this encouragement, you know, to keep reporting on that from the top.

So this kind of construct is, in theory, at last, you know, the idea of yes, you should – you should go and investigate. But in practice, because issues are so flexible now and because the public is paying attention to things online and local is no longer local – there’s no such thing as local, I think, anymore –

MR. KUO: Right.

MS. REPNIKOVA: – that has been a big transformation with the internet, in practice it becomes actually a very short, you know, span of time when you can really investigate even local officials.

And then on the local level side, of course, there’s a battle. On one hand, you want to protect your reputation. On the one hand – on the other hand, there has been a lot of effort to standardize crisis communication and local official interactions with journalists. There are lot of trainings going on nationally – very effective trainings like kind of PR type, you know, strategic communication we see in the West. So there’s all this effort to make them more responsive. But at the same time, when it comes to getting a bad story or a bad image, they’re going to try to, of course, cater the message or maybe hide some stories as well. So it’s a tension, like, how do I stay presentable and, you know, oblige this
idea of effective communication, but how do I also present the message that really speaks well of my work?

MR. KUO: Maria, following up on something you just said in response to John here, I thought it was really interesting that you said local is no longer just local.

MS. REPNIKOVA: Right.

MR. KUO: So when local becomes national, and when there’s a bit of malfeasance in some county, in some province, to what extent does this read in public opinion as a national issue? Does this – does this redirect ire toward the center?

MS. REPNIKOVA: Well, I think –

MR. KUO: In the age of the internet, yeah.

MS. REPNIKOVA: – it reads as a national issue pretty quickly because a lot of these issues are repetitive.

MR. KUO: Right. Right. Right.

MS. REPNIKOVA: So they’re kind of systemic. And at one of the talks I gave early on about this work there was also a journalist from former, I think – (inaudible) – who mentioned that, you know, don’t mistake our focus on local issues as something kind of noncontroversial or a bit cowardly, right, because a lot of these local issues, they appear across counties and cities, you know, accidents/incidents.


MS. REPNIKOVA: So any informative reader will know that this is actually a national issue. It’s something that appeals to me. And, in fact, it becomes sensitive. So I think the sensitivity of local, especially in this day and age, has really magnified, and –

MR. JOHNSON: Just to follow up further on that, because this local center thing is quite interesting. In your research, did you pick up anything in the last few years about how, you know, as we’ve seen tiger after tiger at the center fall – (laughs) – in the anti-corruption campaign, how some of that traditional, you know, the emperor’s good, the local official is bad, is that eroding, from your point of view? In other words, was it a shock to people that indeed, all the way up the food chain, the apple cart is bad? Or did you get a sense of that?

MS. REPNIKOVA: I guess I didn’t get a huge shock because it was such an orchestrated campaign. So sort of their assumption is that, I guess, in many countries there’s a lot of corruption at different levels, but the idea that now they’ve been highlighted by the state and, you know, punished for it, many people think it’s a good thing and it makes sense, especially the wider public. They hear it on the radio. They hear it in the news. You know, it’s just – it’s a cause of justice. You see all these videos with officials pleading, you know penance with the party.

MR. JOHNSON: Right.
MR. KUO: Right.

MS. REPNIKOVA: So there is this kind of sense of almost patriotism, I think, that comes up.

MR. JOHNSON: Blood sport. (Laughs.)

MS. REPNIKOVA: But at the same time, when we speak to journalists about their day-to-day work, they still focus on local level matters much more than central level. I think it’s important to note here, to John’s question as well, that there is this practice of extraterritorial supervision – it’s called yidijingdu in Chinese – many of you have heard about. It’s a very interesting, I think, creative practice that we don’t see in many countries. But in China it’s been quite a staple over the years, is the idea that a journalist from one city or one province or county will go to another one to report on their issues, because they’re controlled by local officials, right? And that happens all over.

In Pengpai, you know, they don’t report much on Shanghai officials, but they go up to Guangzhou or to Beijing, or so forth, and they exchange roles, right? And they can also only last so long, because local officials have networks with one another. They complain, you know, to Shanghai. So it’s not – (inaudible) – and they’re allowed to do whatever they like forever. But it’s a creative strategy to avoid local-level pressure for a little bit.

MR. KUO: I want to put a question to you about – that takes your model and asks you to make some predictions about something happening today, which is #MeToo – the #MeToo hashtag. So this is – we’re starting to see this happening.

MS. REPNIKOVA: Right. (Laughs.) Yes.

MR. KUO: Right. We’re starting to see this happening in China. What is the likely response going to be? Is this going to be something that journalists are going to be able to sink their teeth into and go after, or is this too much of a sort of load-bearing wall?

MS. REPNIKOVA: From my experiences talking about gender issues in general in China, there are – there are often discussions of that in journalism rooms. It seems to be quite a heated issue, like everybody wants to talk about it, and from different sides. You know, for example, male editors would say, well, there are not enough male journalists anymore because they take up jobs at hotel and other places, and they’re much better paid. They don’t want to do journalism. So why is that a problem? Because we don’t have women going to all these fighting zones. You know, it’s dangerous for them. I’m like, well, why is that? You know, they do it in the U.S. And, you know, we get into this debate. And sometimes they’re like, yeah, maybe it’s not a big deal. But somehow, you know, culturally, I guess it’s not as common. And I think it’s not just Chinese. It’s similar in Russian culture and other cultures as well. But it’s the idea of kind of gender being sort of almost like – it’s almost an elephant in the room, I think, in many discussions.

There was a case I believe a year and a half ago, sort of a sexual-misconduct case, in one of the Nanfang media outlets that was widely reported on as well. So it’s talked about. So I think it’s not so sensitive as a red-zone subject that you just can’t tackle. I think people are going to talk about it. But, of course, how they package it, what words they use, you know, what strategies, what metaphors, I think that’s going to be interesting to observe.
MR. JOHNSON: Great. OK, I think we have time for maybe one more from the audience. Right here. Yeah.

Q: Tristan Green (sp).

So you mentioned –

MR. JOHNSON: Where are you from, Tristan (sp)? Sorry.

Q: I’m just independent. I’m here on my own.

MR. JOHNSON: All right.

Q: So you mentioned the popularity of global propaganda back home in China. Is there a leg of Chinese propaganda that’s maybe targeted at, like, the Chinese living and working and studying abroad? Or is that like – is that the intent of the global propaganda, or is it like a separate part that’s targeted more at Chinese expats?

MS. REPNIKOVA: Yeah, great question. I think there is a lot of the content that’s targeted directly at expats; and again, not necessarily a uniquely Chinese tactic, but there are a lot of apps and, you know, news outlets that are directly targeted towards diasporas. And it makes sense, because it makes them closely more aligned to home.

And, in fact, some of these are kind of startup environments as well. They’re not always official media. They are various kind of youth type, you know, publications that target exchange students and just tell them about the world and what things are happening in China, as well as Chinese students abroad, you know. So there are kind of creative outlets that are specifically targeted towards, yeah, diaspora groups, but especially students. So that is –

MR. KUO: The Daily?

MS. REPNIKOVA: It’s got a different content, I would say, from the content I described here, but oftentimes the content overlaps. If you have a global-media, you know, presence, say the CGTN presence in Africa or elsewhere, of course some of their reporting will target just global audiences. Some of it is going to target African audiences. Some of it is probably going to appeal to Chinese audiences back home. So it has many, many purposes. And that’s why it’s potentially quite a high payoff of the investment.

MR. KUO: Speaking of Africa and Chinese propaganda, so you’re on your way to Kenya and to Ethiopia, right? And you’re going to be looking at the effectiveness of Chinese state media soft-power efforts in that region. That’ll be really interesting.

MS. REPNIKOVA: Yeah. That’s my next – beginnings of a next project. And in particular, Africa has been a very successful, I think, space for Chinese media operations. So I’m interested in traditional, but also new media, commercialized, you know, media practitioners there, but also so-called meaning makers, Chinese who are explaining China to the world. So they include public-diplomacy people. They include NGO leaders and so forth. So those who are trying to present a particular vision of China and how that relates to people on the ground.
MR. KUO: OK.

MR. JOHNSON: Well, I think that’s probably a good place to end up. Thanks very much.

If you would please join me in thanking Maria and Kaiser. Thank you very much. (Applause.)

(END)