

The Battle for Hong Kong Is Being Fought in Sydney and Vancouver

How Beijing is weaponizing social media in its fight to crush the Hong Kong protests.

By Louisa Lim

Ms. Lim, the author of “The People’s Republic of Amnesia: Tiananmen Revisited,” is writing a book about Hong Kong.

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MELBOURNE, Australia — As the police deploy tear gas against protesters on the streets of Hong Kong, another battle is raging less visibly: the one for narrative control. After weeks of asserting that the unrest had been orchestrated by foreign “black hands,” Chinese officials on Monday accused protesters of showing the first signs of “terrorism.” Such messaging is key to Beijing’s public opinion operation, which has been turned up to full volume.

The weapons of this information war include a flood of social media posts from state-run media, some carrying misinformation. When a woman dispensing first aid was shot in the eye by the Hong Kong police, the state-run CCTV reported on its official social media account that she had been shot by protesters. It also accused her of handing out money to demonstrators. Chinese readers are unlikely to question the veracity of such an authoritative source, and CCTV’s Weibo post, which says the movement is slandering the Hong Kong police by blaming them for the injury, has been liked more than 700,000 times.

Ten weeks ago, when Hong Kongers first took to the streets to protest disputed extradition legislation, Beijing censored all reports of this civil unrest. But in recent days, it has reveled in posting video of protesters purportedly using air guns, slingshots and petrol bombs against the police. The state-run Global Times has described protesters as “nothing more than street thugs who want Hong Kong to ‘go to hell,’” or as people who had “voluntarily stripped themselves of their national identity.” Such descriptions are aimed at delegitimizing the protesters’ cause, especially among educated mainlanders who might otherwise be sympathetic.

Chinese people living or studying overseas are another important audience for Beijing’s messaging. Their primary news diet is largely delivered via WeChat, a Chinese chat app where messages are subject to censorship, so they often still fall within Beijing’s

propaganda orbit. Recent pictures of an American diplomat meeting two activists, Joshua Wong and Nathan Law, were used to bolster Beijing's claims of hostile foreign forces backing the protests. On Tuesday, scenes of a Chinese state media worker being tied up at the airport and beaten by young protesters flooded Chinese social media, bolstering calls for Beijing to intervene militarily in Hong Kong.

Such messaging helps to mobilize Chinese communities, especially newly arrived migrants in Australia, Canada, the United States and elsewhere, to support the official line from Beijing. One website for a planned protest this weekend in Sydney asks Chinese to stand together against "rioting" in Hong Kong, which it said was causing discrimination against Chinese in Australia.

The battle over Hong Kong is, in effect, being exported, pitting overseas Chinese communities against each other. Over the past few weeks, "Lennon Walls," covered in colorful Post-it notes expressing support for Hong Kong, have been torn down by supporters of Beijing from Auckland, New Zealand, to Vancouver, British Columbia, and from Hobart, Australia, to Harvard Square. After a violent tussle between pro-China and pro-Hong Kong students in late July at the University of Queensland in Australia, the Chinese consul-general in Brisbane, Xu Jie, issued a statement praising the "spontaneous patriotic behavior of Chinese students."

One reason this conflict is playing out on social media is that almost all of Hong Kong's big media companies are owned by mainland business executives or groups with extensive business interests in China, so they have instinctively taken a pro-Beijing stance. This has left digital news outlets and the overseas media as the front line in the battle for public opinion. People trying to livestream the protests and foreign media are apparently already being targeted by the police. In recent weeks, a BBC journalist was saved from injury only by his face mask, which shattered when the police shot directly at his head. Another reporter wearing a bright yellow press vest was crushed against a wall by three police officers. Two journalists were attacked by a gang of street thugs, and a well-known British livestreamer scratching his belly was publicly accused by a pro-Beijing politician of being a "foreign commander" sending hand signals to protesters. Such an accusation would be laughable had it not been so widely shared.

To counter what they say are lies and malicious distortions, the protesters have started to hold regular news conferences, with their representatives addressing the media wearing face masks and yellow helmets. The movement's social media strategy has been to use colorful memes and videos tailored for different audiences, including large-print messages with floral backgrounds for elderly readers.

In recent days, the state-run Chinese media has begun sharing videos showing large-scale exercises featuring the People's Armed Police, a paramilitary group, in the city of Shenzhen, over the border from Hong Kong. The same group, instead of the People's

Liberation Army, was used to crack down on protests in Chengdu in 1989. Hong Kongers may dismiss these provocations as bluffing, but it is a clear sign that the information war, like the battle for Hong Kong itself, is set to escalate further.

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