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## **China's Charm Offensive in Latin America and the Caribbean: A Comprehensive Analysis of China's Strategic Communication Strategy Across the Region [Part II: Influencing the Media]**

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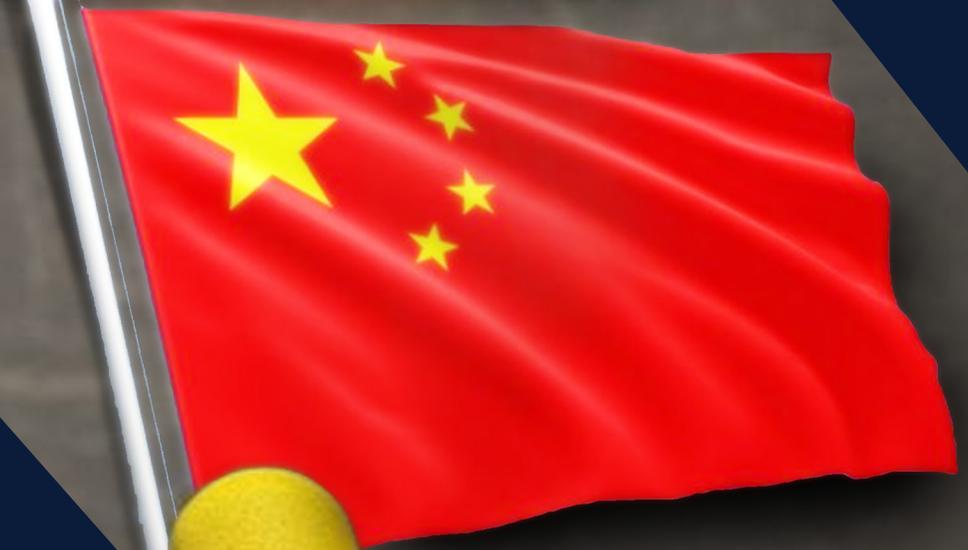
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# CHINA'S CHARM OFFENSIVE IN LATIN AMERICA AND THE CARIBBEAN:

A COMPREHENSIVE ANALYSIS OF CHINA'S  
STRATEGIC COMMUNICATION STRATEGY  
ACROSS THE REGION

*PART II: INFLUENCING THE MEDIA*

**PABLO BAISOTTI**

## **JUNE 2023**

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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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This report explores China's strategy to influence Latin American and Caribbean (LAC) populations through the Chinese and local media. Both are vital in shaping local opinion in favor of the Communist Party of China's (CCP) ideological objectives. News outlets such as the Xinhua News Agency, the *People's Daily*, *China Radio International*, *China Central Television (CCTV)*, *CGTN Spanish*, and *China Today* are strategic and geopolitical tools that seek to replicate, amplify, and consolidate the authoritarian power of China's President Xi Jinping. China tries to transmit a positive image through campaigns in all possible media, incorporating journalists, academics, LAC politicians, and all those who can support its narrative through propaganda, censorship, and expansion of Chinese and other communication platforms.

Recommendations for the United States:

1. Increase funding for independent investigative journalism in LAC.
2. Expand scholarship programs and hire LAC staff in U.S. media outlets working on the continent.
3. Establish agreements between U.S. and LAC newspapers to interact more closely (staff and news exchanges, courses, etc.).
4. Promote U.S. media subsidiaries in LAC by hiring personnel from each country to present the news in that country's language and dialect.
5. Freely distribute cultural material created and produced in the United States. Allow free access to cultural platforms, programs, and films promoting U.S. soft power.
6. Create radio programs in English, Spanish, and Portuguese for regular broadcasting in all LAC countries.
7. Donate old communications equipment to cash-strapped foreign news agencies.

## INTRODUCTION

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In 2009, China's investment in major media outlets abroad reached US\$7.25 billion.<sup>1</sup> The state news agency Xinhua then increased its international bureaus from 100 to 186. According to economist David Shambaugh of George Washington University, this use of soft power costs around US\$10 billion. The interest in influencing leading foreign media since the mid-2000s included "borrowing" foreign newspapers, as Anne-Marie Brady of the University of Canterbury, New Zealand, stated in her article "China's Foreign Propaganda Machine."<sup>2</sup> Researcher and co-director of the China Media Project, David Bandurski, compiled quotes from President Xi Jinping's media speeches from his inauguration in 2013 to February 2016. In August 2013, at the National Working Day on Propaganda and Ideology, he emphasized that "the internet is the top priority of priorities."

In February of 2014, during the first meeting of the Office of the Central Leading Group for Cyberspace Affairs, he stressed it was necessary to "innovate and promote online propaganda [...] actively putting into practice the socialist fundamental values [...] ensuring a clear and bright online space." At the end of 2015, he gave a speech to the *People's Liberation Army Daily*, stressing that "wherever the readers are, wherever the viewers are, that is where propaganda reports should spread their tentacles [...] the end point of propaganda and ideology work." Finally, in February 2016, Xi gave a speech to the *Party's News and Public Opinion Workday*. He said, "The Party's news and public opinion work is to raise high the banner of Marxism-Leninism, promote high morale, distinguish between truth and falsehood, unite China and abroad, and connect with the world." He added it was necessary to maintain "a high level of uniformity with the Party in ideology, policy and action [...] toward the realization of the Chinese dream of the great rejuvenation of the Chinese people."<sup>3</sup>

The Chinese media is a vital cog in influencing and directing global public opinion to support the Chinese Communist Party's (CCP's) ideological goals. Xi urged China Central Television (CCTV), renamed CGTN in 2016, to build a new global narrative. As Haiqing Yu, associate professor at the Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology's

School of Media and Communication, noted, together with the world's largest network of media organizations, the CCP created an "army" of online "commentators" or "trolls" to manipulate public opinion.<sup>4</sup>

According to Sarah Cook of Freedom House, the CCP suppressed critical foreign news coverage using direct action by Chinese government representatives, co-optation of media owners to marginalize critical reporting and commentary, imposed self-censorship, indirect pressure to prevent or punish the publication of unfavorable content, and the threat of defamation lawsuits.<sup>5</sup> Cook highlighted five trends in Chinese global propaganda in 2018: (1) A more aggressive approach to foreign media influence, (2) Greater influence through media ownership and infrastructure, (3) Innovation in a changing technological environment, (4) Intervention in foreign policy and public debate, and (5) Transforming foreign media markets to China's image.<sup>6</sup> As Huang Kunming, a member of the Political Bureau of the CCP Central Committee and director of its publicity department, pointed out, all of this would be done under the leadership of the CCP on media.<sup>7</sup>

In April 2019, China launched a new media group called The Belt and Road News Network (BRNN), to boost "understanding, friendship and cooperation, and forming a standardized mechanism for collaboration" among the countries and regions participating in the initiative. As Xi stated at the first Belt and Road Forum in 2017, "We will develop [...] a Belt and Road news alliance." BRNN is run by the *People's Daily*, China's largest newspaper group and the official media outlet of the CCP Central Committee. Activities include news tours, seminars, awards, access to archives and news databases, and workshops and training programs.<sup>8</sup> In March 2020, then-U.S. Secretary of State Mike Pompeo said the Chinese media were not independent or trustworthy, but foreign missions controlled by the Chinese government.<sup>9</sup> For Executive Director Tom Hollihan of the U.S.-China Institute at the University of Southern California, the Chinese media inside the country became more nationalistic and patriotic, and began to attack those outside China perceived as adversaries.<sup>10</sup> Cook also noted in his 2020 report, *Beijing's Global Megaphone*, that when you had control of the information nodes, you

could use them as you wish. She described the use of propaganda, censorship, and content dissemination to manipulate and control global public opinion abroad. Cook distinguished three central elements of China's strategy: propaganda, censorship, and the expansion of its platforms.<sup>11</sup>

This way, communication became vital in China's offensive on the West as it sought to dominate global narratives and discourse. The pandemic was used to position China as a model of resilience and international aid and to eliminate the fact it was the origin of the virus. This communications effort involved the implementation of exchanges and training of foreign reporters and journalists. Beijing accelerated the delivery of content to international state media, paid for supplements in major foreign newspapers, and sought to sign bilateral cooperation agreements with international media.<sup>12</sup> In May 2021, Xi ordered the CCP to redouble efforts to strengthen external propaganda, expand people-to-people exchanges, and promote the country's interests through Confucius Institutes, for example.<sup>13</sup>

This report will analyze China's communication strategy in LAC through the action of the Chinese media and its foreign media networks as a tool to influence LAC in favor of the CCP's ideological objectives. It will also seek to understand the functioning of the vast network of print, audiovisual, and digital media owned by the Chinese government and LAC groups that serve the purpose of the Chinese regime. News outlets such as the Xinhua News Agency, the *People's Daily*, *China Radio International*, *China Central Television (CCTV)*, *CGTN Español*, and *China Today* are strategic and geopolitical tools that seek to repeat, amplify, and consolidate the authoritarian power of Xi. In addition, it is crucial to understand the direct action of representatives of the Chinese government to marginalize critical information through direct and indirect pressure. It will also study how China tries to transmit a positive image through campaigns in all possible media, incorporating LAC journalists, academics, politicians, and all those who can promote its image and narrative.

## METHODOLOGY

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This research is based on primary sources, media, reports, research articles, and interviews. Among essential sources for this study were the works of *Freedom House*. In particular, *Beijing's Global Media Influence 2022* had valuable information for framing China's influence in Argentina, Brazil, Chile, Colombia, Mexico, Panama, and Peru. Important sources of information came from research centers, academic journals, and university papers. The Chinese embassies and consulates' official releases were consulted, as were Chinese newspapers in Spanish and English: *CGTN Español*, *Xinhuanet*, *people.cn*, *China Today*, *Cri Online*, *ChinaNews*, *CRI.es.*, and *China.Org*. Finally, LAC newspapers helped deepen the topics investigated and frame them.

## CHINA'S RELATIONS WITH JOURNALISTS AND THE MEDIA IN LATIN AMERICA AND THE CARIBBEAN

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### Overview

China deployed a policy in LAC to gain political influence and consolidate its presence in the region. The strategy was aimed at less conventional spheres than the economy and focused on interdisciplinary cooperation between universities, think tanks, media, political parties, and various institutions on both sides of the Pacific, and the promotion of Chinese culture and exchange programs with influential Latin American figures.<sup>14</sup>

Chinese officials use economic coercion to silence negative media reports or commentary in the local language, thus gaining a direct presence in major Latin American newspapers. Diplomats not only pressure media editors to alter critical coverage or intimidate journalists but also provide editorials and writings with a distorted narrative and sometimes aggressive rhetoric.<sup>15</sup> In LAC countries with more difficulties and dangers for the free and independent press, Chinese pressure against attacks by journalists, politicians, and business people is less than in countries with broad press freedom.

In Cuba, Venezuela, and Nicaragua, for example, it is rare to find diplomats with aggressive and confrontational rhetoric as the governments themselves muzzle press freedom. In Colombia and Mexico, the press has not operated with complete freedom, especially given the increasing threats and violence from members of narco-terrorist groups and even from the remnants of guerrilla or other illegal armed groups. Negative Colombian media coverage tended to focus on concerns about human rights violations and environmental degradation related to Chinese companies' operations in the country. Moreover, Colombia has a historically strong press, resistant to coercive influences such as those pushed by Beijing. Chinese diplomats in Mexico are active in such print media as *El Financiero*, *Milenio*, and *El Universal*, as well as on Twitter and Facebook. They promoted misleading narratives about human rights and the origins of the pandemic. Meanwhile, Mexican media face violent reprisals that prevent in-depth media coverage of China.

In contrast, in countries with greater press freedom, such as Chile and Brazil, Chinese diplomats have been active in responding to and attempting to refute the accusations against their government. In Chile, several politicians and journalists doubted the veracity of Chinese discourse, and media outlets expressed astonishment at China's aggressive diplomatic rhetoric in the country while they denounced its human rights record and economic investments. Recent ambassadors there argued against those who dared to criticize China using direct and veiled threats. In Brazil, Chinese diplomacy expanded its engagement with local media as it began responding to negative or offensive reporting by journalists and politicians (especially during the government of Jair Bolsonaro, 2019-2022). At the same time, the Chinese sought to introduce positive messages of an economic and technological nature and the importance of the bilateral relationship.

In other countries such as Argentina, Panama, and Peru, the presence of the Chinese Embassy and its diplomats in the media has been regular and focused on promoting their interests. In Argentina, a broad network of links has been woven with various media groups, academics, political leaders, and influential people. There is also a large diaspora in Argentina that cooperates with the Chinese narrative and

supports its policies. One of those interviewed was Gustavo Ng, director and founder of the bilingual magazine, *Dangdai*, which is in tune with the regime.

The communicative shortcoming in Argentina is media concentration, which makes transparency and accountability impossible, affecting freedom and independence of communication, ultimately benefiting China's narrative. Chinese diplomats in Panama and Peru are very active on Twitter and regularly give interviews and publish editorial articles in local media. Their influence is almost irrepressible in Panama, and many journalists and media owners have been targeted and sued. In Peru, the state media broadcast largely pro-Beijing content, much of it overseen by the embassy, which does not hesitate to react to negative local coverage of what it considers "sensitive" issues, such as the origin of the pandemic. Local politicians were also "warned" about anti-Chinese views on mining, environmental issues, and other projects that have benefited from Chinese investment.<sup>16</sup>

Another interesting phenomenon expanding in LAC is the presence of Chinese organized crime. Chinese mafia organizations known as Triads were detected in Panama and Costa Rica. The curious thing is that, in addition to illegal activities, they began to use threats and violence in Costa Rica to intimidate or punish Chinese dissidents who criticized the country. In November 2019, Costa Rican media reported that journalist Greivin Moya had received threats from the Triads and had to be protected by local authorities after denouncing their operations in the Central American country. These criminal groups merit further investigation.<sup>17</sup>

Researcher Richard Puppini asserted that China constantly tries to increase its influence through a communications strategy in which it presents itself as the new benevolent hegemon and the dominant power in the international system. He stresses that its two main characteristics are soft power and attempts at media influence. One of China's criticisms of the United States in LAC is its unilateralism and Cold War mentality. It is important to remember that, during the Cold War, the United States directly or indirectly supported diplomatically or militarily the fall of several Latin American governments in the face of the communist threat embodied by the

Soviet Union. China, therefore, presents itself as a reliable, anti-imperialist, and cooperative partner. But, as U.S. Southern Command Chief General Laura Richardson noted, "China is extending its malign influence, flexing its economic muscle and engaging in grey-zone activities to expand its military and political access and influence."<sup>18</sup> As bilateral conflict and intra-regional fragmentation deepen, the margins of maneuver for LAC will narrow in terms of managing relations toward Washington and Beijing.<sup>19</sup> At present, some Latin American elites justify ignoring China's behavior because the United States has not made a better offer or because it has a negative history of imperialism and military interventions in the region.<sup>20</sup>

Researcher Camilo Defelipe Villa said the journalistic workshops that the Chinese government proposes to Latin American journalists provide an important political charge through a unified, coordinated discourse and with an emotional atmosphere that is different from Western news agencies such as the *Voice of America*, *BBC*, *DW*, and *France24*, which have a more geopolitical stance.<sup>21</sup> China implemented many initiatives to increase its influence over journalists, academics, politicians, and legislators in a region where the United States traditionally exerted greater influence over opinion leaders. However, Chinese soft power did not yield the expected results because Latin American audiences became suspicious of Chinese media such as Xinhua and CGTN.<sup>22</sup> Hence, the "indoctrination" of influential reporters was accelerated through, among other things, trips to China, so they would report positively on the country and, thus, have an impact on Latin American audiences. The Chinese government considers these effective measures to gain influential voices, as evidenced by the increased frequency of such trips under Xi's rule.<sup>23</sup>

For Néstor Restivo, there is not a co-optation of journalists by the Chinese regime but rather a search for interested parties in the country to form a network or cooperation forums. To achieve this, one of the strategies used is inviting journalists from all over the world to China to have a positive experience there, engaging local journalists, paying for news supplements in foreign media, or purchasing advertising space.

In contrast, Robert Evan Ellis, a professor and researcher at the U.S. Army War College Strategic Studies Institute, observed during an interview that China's friendliness was more focused on obtaining a commercial advantage or gaining influence over judges, journalists, and students. In a sense, it is a way of "seducing" interlocutors for further profit. He stated it was a more subtle seduction than in Cold War times, although there are forbidden subjects for China, such as policy toward its ethnic minorities. In doing so, the Chinese government resorts to threats, which can be veiled or concrete through, for example, Chinese police stations abroad.<sup>24</sup>

Puppin also noted that China's communication strategy has focused on softening criticism. One example is the relationship between China and Guyana. In the latter country, the boom in the local oil industry allowed for a massive influx of Chinese capital. As a result, a VICE Media documentary exposed the link between local corruption and Chinese investment. A local editor was subsequently invited to participate in the China International Press Communication Centre (CIPCC) program to try to change his position.<sup>25</sup> This program, sponsored by the Chinese state and active since 2014, offered such "rebel" journalists a four-to-six-month scholarship to travel around different Chinese provinces.

About 450 journalists worldwide have thus far been trained through the CIPCC program. The 2022 edition welcomed 73 journalists from 54 countries. According to Assistant Foreign Affairs Minister Hua Chunying, the program provides a platform for visits to historic sites, high-tech firms, a taste of traditional Chinese culture, the practice of Tai Chi, and Chinese calligraphy. She said that today there are two views on China; "one is about threat and challenge, and the other, hope and opportunity."<sup>26</sup> During the pandemic, a cloud center opened for the media of developing countries to "see and feel the pulse of China's development," Hua said. She added, "I hope you will use your pen and camera to tell the world truthfully what you see and hear in China and what you think, to help the world know and understand China better." The 2023 edition will host over 60 journalists from countries across LAC,<sup>28</sup> the Asia-Pacific, Africa, and Eastern Europe to report on China's socioeconomic development, diplomacy, significant domestic and diplomatic events, science and technology,

and culture; and to meet with governmental departments, enterprises, think tanks, and the media, and to visit selected provinces.<sup>29</sup>

The corruption cases involving China in LAC are not isolated events. What has been called "geostrategic corruption" took hold two decades ago in LAC, led by China. Corrupt means, such as no-bid contracts, insider financial deals, and special relationships with those in power, are used to influence a given country's politics, economy, and society. Like Chinese investment, this practice is more common with populist governments, such as those in Argentina, Bolivia, Ecuador, and Venezuela.<sup>30</sup> Bolivian engineer Renán Torrico noted the Chinese works built in Bolivia are of poor quality and last very little time. The most prominent case was that of former President of Bolivia Evo Morales' partner, Gabriela Zapata, a Chinese company director sentenced to ten years in prison for corruption. During Morales' term of office (2006-2019), Chinese companies gained a critical position in key sectors of the economy to the point of achieving a monopoly in the lithium industry. In Argentina's provinces, geostrategic corruption is also widespread. Many governors consented to form a corruption network that China has used to invest in everything it can (nuclear and hydroelectric power plants, lithium battery plants, satellite tracking ground stations, railways, etc.). In Ecuador, these projects include a dam built in exchange for oil contracts; the Coca Codo Sinclair hydroelectric plant, which developed massive cracks shortly after its construction; and the Quijos hydroelectric project, which did not generate the promised volumes of energy.<sup>32</sup> Many projects were uncompleted in Venezuela, such as the US\$2.7 billion Tinaco-Anaco railway and a US\$200 million rice processing plant in Delta Amaruco. However, Chinese banks continued to lend to Venezuela, revealed *Latinoamérica Sostenible*<sup>33</sup> in a report documenting China's lack of follow-up on its financing projects.<sup>34</sup>

China produces its material through the official media agency Xinhua, CGTN, and *China Daily*. It also buys advertising supplements in various periodicals in the region, enabling the dissemination of information in the service of the government. This also ensures that the benefiting news organizations do not take overly critical positions toward China. CGTN often provides free images, video, and audio

broadcasts to the LAC media. Partly due to the limited budgets of the region's media and the difficulty of obtaining similar material on their own, Latin American media often accept and use these media regardless of the propaganda effects.<sup>35</sup> CGTN's Spanish-language channel went on air in 2007 to disseminate China's voice in Spanish-speaking countries.

This region has increased in importance for China in recent years, and with the party's support, the global broadcasting network has grown. CGTN in Spanish is based at CCTV's headquarters in Beijing and a North American office in Washington, D.C. Until 2018, CCTV had five offices in LAC (Argentina, Brazil, Cuba, Mexico, and Venezuela).<sup>36</sup>

Among the many interviews conducted were those with professor and researcher Jorge Malena; the Director and Founder of the Confucius Institute of the Pontificia Universidad Católica del Perú, Rubén Tang, and the Senior Director of McLarty Associates and former Mexican Ambassador to China, Jorge Guajardo.<sup>37</sup> Malena pointed out that China was not seeking to co-opt but rather mitigate the cultural or ideological prejudice held against it "as a result of belonging to the Western cultural hemisphere." He said it was up to the journalists, out of conviction or convenience, to take a pro-China stance. Tang said there was a strong Chinese interest in getting regional media to support its political positions or actions, especially with the current president, Xi. He also said it was difficult for regional media to maintain independence when there was so much Chinese influence and "cooperation." Guajardo argued that there was not really a Chinese communication strategy to attract Latin American media beyond the publications that Chinese ambassadors regularly publish "that nobody reads." His view was there was little engagement. The best way they worked together was through their news service, Xinhua, creating a narrative often run by local newspapers without editorial or ideological distinction.

Media cooperation and academia are crucial to multilateral agreements between LAC countries and China, such as the Celac-China Cooperation Plan 2015-2019 (between 33 Western Hemisphere nations and China). According to Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi, it is the "main

channel for general cooperation" to "create new capacities in the media."<sup>38</sup> This has resulted in 6,000 government scholarships, 6,000 training opportunities, and 400 opportunities for master's programs in China between 2015 and 2019. Many of these media training programs were administered by Xinhua and the *People's Daily*, with the express political purpose of improving the foreign perception of China and legitimizing the ruling party.<sup>39</sup>

At the 2016 Media Leaders' Summit in Santiago, Chile, Xi said, "We want to take advantage of new technologies for the media in both China and Latin America and the Caribbean to show the realities of each region." With more than 100 representatives of the most important media from Latin America, the Caribbean, and China in attendance, Xi insisted on cooperation to strengthen ties between the two and said, "the media can do a great job to give continuity and momentum to the friendship between the two sides."<sup>40</sup> As Margaret Myers argues, important groups within organizations such as the UN Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC) and the Inter-American Development Bank support and promote the China-Latin America relationship. Without going any further, ECLAC's executive secretary, Alicia Bárcena, highlighted China's disposition toward the region and the principles of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development.<sup>41</sup>

At the China-Latin America and the Caribbean Media Forum held in Buenos Aires in 2018, representatives of more than 100 media outlets from China and LAC agreed to cooperate further in press and communications. The organizers noted that a community of destiny was vital for mutual understanding and truthful, comprehensive, objective, and balanced media exchanges. The CPC Central Committee Deputy Director of Publicity, Jiang Jianguo, added there were development opportunities for building a community of mutual destiny. For his part, Xinhua News Agency President Cai Mingzhao mentioned the launch of special line services, the creation of short videos, and the daily supply of 100 videos, among other issues. He added: "We have worked with Alibaba [...] to set up a new media technology company, with which we have developed a 'media brain' platform." This would include using artificial intelligence for news production, so the "collection, production

and distribution of video is done by machines.” On the Latin American side, the Government Secretary of Argentina’s Federal System of Media and Public Contents, Hernán Lombardi, called for deepening understanding between China and Latin America: “Opinion building in our societies [...] relations without limits.” The editor-in-chief of Cuba’s *Prensa Latina*, Néstor Marín, stressed that the current challenge for Latin American media was to achieve an optimal level of information and dissemination on the Belt and Road Initiative. Meanwhile, Chilean daily *La Tercera*’s Editor-in-Chief, Juan Paulo Iglesias, called for reliability as “the main strength of the traditional media (mostly print) in the face of internet content.”

The president and founder of the Brazilian multinational *Consultoría, Métodos, Asesoría y Mercantil*, José Juan Sánchez, encouraged the possibility of exchanging direct agro-industrial information with China and, at the same time, receiving information on Chinese raw materials. Finally, Alejandro Ramos Esquivel, the director general of Mexican news agency Notimex said that China proposes feasible business schemes for Latin American media through the Xinhua agency.<sup>42</sup> The China-Latin America and Caribbean Press Centre program is a six-month work and study project in Beijing aimed at Latin American journalists from 10 countries. At the 2018 second edition, the Vice President of the Public Diplomacy Association of China, Liu Biwei, remarked that cooperation had achieved rapid development within the framework of the Belt and Road Initiative.<sup>43</sup> During the opening ceremony of the program’s second edition, the Consul and Director of the Public Diplomacy Office of the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Liu Yutong, said the selected journalists would get to know the various provinces in addition to receiving courses on Chinese economy, politics, culture, and language.<sup>44</sup> In Beijing in 2019, the General Secretary of the Buenos Aires Press Workers Union, Lidia Fagale, was appointed president of the Belt and Road Journalists Cooperation Platform, which aims to deepen exchanges and cooperation with groups of communicators in the countries and regions involved and to facilitate friendly people-to-people exchanges between different countries.<sup>45</sup>

The China Media Group (CMG),<sup>46</sup> ECLAC, and the Latin American Information Alliance organized an Online Forum on Media Cooperation in August 2020. They affirmed the need to cooperate to fight the pandemic and strengthen the construction of the “China-LAC shared future community.” CMG President and Editor-in-Chief Shen Haixiong said, “Chinese and Latin American media should further strengthen cooperation, adopt a responsible attitude, uphold the principles of objectivity, fairness, and truthfulness, jointly express the voice of Chinese and Latin American media.” Zhou Zhiwei stressed that the Chinese and LAC media could guide public opinion more. The forum was unanimous in affirming that, in the post-pandemic era, the media would be crucial to the economy’s recovery.<sup>47</sup>

Coinciding with the third China-Celac Forum Ministers’ Meeting, CGTN and more than 30 LAC media outlets launched the China-LAC Media Action initiative in 2021. Shen recalled that Xi considered media exchanges an important part of China-Latin American relations and that Chinese and Latin American media played an important role in conveying and developing friendship between the two peoples. He stated that the CMG had actively promoted exchanges between Chinese and Latin American media to uphold the value of impartial and objective journalism, expand channels of communication and cooperation, and contribute to the development of China-Latin American relations. Juan Carlos Isaza Montejo, executive director of the Latin American News Alliance, said it would continue to promote cooperation with CGTN in news exchange and other areas to improve understanding between China and Latin America. Peru’s *Agencia de Noticias Andina*, Colombia’s *Radio y Televisión Nacional*, Chile’s *Pressenza* news agency, Venezuela’s *TeleSUR*, and Argentina’s *Grupo América* supported the initiative.<sup>48</sup> In 2022, prior to China’s Youth Day (May 4), the special program “CGTN China-Latin America Youth Chat” was launched, in which university students from both sides were invited to offer their suggestions in virtual forums on future global development. The program consisted of five forums and was promoted by CGTN, Argentina’s *Televisión Pública Argentina*, Mexico’s *TV Azteca*, Panama’s *Televisora Nacional*, and *Trece* from Costa Rica Televisión, among others.<sup>49</sup>

## Case Studies

Since 2016, Chinese and LAC public and private media groups have forged partnerships and co-productions in audiovisual and print products. The work of Chinese state media is also occasionally reprinted in regional (mostly state-owned) publications, such as *Agência Brasil*, *Granma* (Cuba), *El Deber* (Bolivia), and *La Tercera* (Chile), and agencies such as *Agence France-Presse* and Spain's *Agencia EFE* have quoted it. *Telesur* in Venezuela dedicates an entire section of its website to republishing daily Xinhua content.<sup>50</sup>

The inclusion of Chinese inserts in the Chilean press has a propaganda objective. Chinese Ambassador to Chile, Xu Bu (2018-2020), published columns and interviews in the *El Mercurio* newspaper and held discussions with Chilean and foreign public figures.<sup>51</sup>

During an official visit to Beijing in 2018, the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the *El Deber* newspaper group strengthened cooperative ties in information, cultural exchange, and social development to consolidate relations between the two entities. The Deputy Director for Latin America and the Caribbean of the Executive, Zhang Run, headed the delegation that received *El Deber's* General Director Pedro Rivero Jordán, Head of Institutional Relations Ingrid Rivero; and Editor of *Mundo* (and Editorialist of *El Deber*), Carlos Morales Peña.

Zhang stressed that Latin America is one of the priorities of Chinese foreign policy today and emphasized the importance of the media for the understanding and rapprochement of peoples. He anticipated that training courses, journalist exchanges, and even the need to open a permanent correspondent's office for Bolivian journalists and media in China would be strengthened.<sup>52</sup> In June 2018, China and Bolivia signed a strategic partnership agreement in which they committed to increasing exchanges in the media and other parts of the cultural sphere to "promote mutual understanding and consolidate the people's basis of friendship between China and Bolivia."<sup>53</sup>

## Argentina

In Argentina, these mechanisms have been even more prominent. In addition to including a media component in the two countries' Comprehensive Strategic Partnership Agreement, Argentina's Ministry of Communications signed a separate agreement with the State Administration of Radio and Television in 2015. This and another agreement signed between the Argentine Senate and Xinhua pointed to a concerted effort to control the flow of information and messages that Argentine audiences receive about China.<sup>54</sup> Xinhua sealed alliances in Argentina with different media groups close to Kirchnerism (a left-leaning populist branch of the Peronist Party currently in government), while CGTN did the same with *Grupo América*, Argentina's second-largest media corporation.

The free media and audiovisual content provided by China portrays a distorted and friendly image of the Chinese regime, which seeks to neutralize criticism. Media penetration is based on economic gain.<sup>55</sup> In Argentina, Chinese media tried to foster partnerships with Argentine television channels to broadcast their audiovisual content. Several media outlets included the *China Watch* supplement. The Argentine media conglomerate *Grupo Veintitrés* contained a supplement provided by Xinhua in its newspaper *Tiempo Argentino* from March to December 2015. The same group's CN23 television channel broadcasts a daily news block on China, along with documentaries and reports also produced by Xinhua. The group's website, Infonews, featured a special section on China. Another media organization, *Grupo Indalo*, used Xinhua news content, as did the Argentine news agency *Télam*, which signed several cooperation agreements with Xinhua. *Grupo América* closed a deal with *China Daily* to insert the four-page *China Watch* supplement twice a month in five of the group's newspapers, including *El Cronista*, the country's leading economic daily. The two news organizations subsequently produced documentaries and other audiovisual products.

In 2017, China's *People's Daily* and Argentina's *La Nación* agreed to distribute content and news jointly. Since 2017, the Chinese newspaper has had a correspondent in Buenos Aires. In Argentina's leading newspaper *Clarín*, the Chinese ambassador wrote several op-ed articles, and the Chinese Embassy produces a newsletter twice a year for various governmental bodies.<sup>56</sup>

Two entities supported by Chinese residents in Argentina, *Muralla Dorada* and *Xia Xia Medios*, aired the television programs *Chino Básico* and *Milenarios* for years. Radio programs dedicated to China include *De acá a la China* broadcast on Radio Palermo and AM750 and *Clave China* on Radio Cooperativa. The documentary series *Cerca y Lejos* and *Sorprendente China/Sorprendente Argentina* were co-produced with CGTN, the official Chinese television network—the former with América TV and the latter with Televisión Pública Argentina. In November 2021, Télam organized a virtual Panorama Forum with *Radio y Televisión Argentina*, Grupo América, and the CMG. Ambassadors from both countries and Argentine Foreign Minister Santiago Cafiero attended the forum. A month later, executives from the Indalo and América Media Groups, among others, participated in the launch of the “LAC-China Media Action” project, which was a co-production between CGTN and the Venezuelan news agency *Telesur* (popular with left-wing audiences in Argentina), as well as the creation of a content-sharing platform.<sup>58</sup>

## Peru

Most local coverage of China is uncritically focused on trade and investment.<sup>59</sup> A special edition of *China Today* magazine for Peru was issued in Lima in 2009. According to Chinese Cultural Advisor Shi Zequn, Peru is the South American country with the largest Chinese diaspora community.<sup>60</sup> *Oriental Magazine*, one of the icons of the Tusán<sup>61</sup> community, directly publishes the communiqués sent to it by the embassy’s Secretariat of Culture and often extracts information from the official Xinhua News Agency. On Sundays, it includes an article from the *People’s Daily*, the principal mouthpiece of the CCP.

CCTV has channels in Spanish, Cantonese, and Mandarin and manages to reach all circles of the diaspora in these languages. The Peruvian-Chinese Chamber of Commerce and other groups promote and finance magazines and publications, always in line with the Chinese Embassy, which has resources and organizes cultural activities with greater impact.<sup>62</sup> The 2016 China-Peru Comprehensive Strategic Partnership included cultural exchanges and media cooperation to achieve broader development goals. That year Xi, on a visit to Peru, said the parties should “share the fruits of cooperation so the vessel of common destiny benefits their people.”<sup>63</sup>

Despite the embassy’s efforts, the Xinhua News Agency failed to market its services to mainstream Peruvian media. As of 2019, Xinhua, CGTN, and China Hoy only cooperate with Peru’s state media through formal and institutional agreements.<sup>64</sup> Prior to the start of the pandemic, Peruvian journalists participated in subsidized trips to China, while public and private media participated in regional CCP-organized virtual media cooperative events to promote a positive message about China. The Chinese Embassy liaised with local media and provided opinion pieces in major publications. Arguments covered topics considered “sensitive,” such as the origins of COVID-19, the question of Taiwan, the United States, and Chinese minorities.<sup>65</sup> The embassy expanded its activity in the local media to cover a wide range of issues and increased its social media activity during 2019 to 2021. Peruvian journalists regularly mentioned the embassy’s publications as a source for reporting on China in the absence of more direct access to information. Several diaspora media cooperate closely with the Chinese Embassy.

## Mexico

The Comprehensive Strategic Partnership between Mexico and China, signed by Xi and Enrique Peña Nieto in 2013, described increased exchanges between young students, academics, media, and sports as desired outcomes.<sup>66</sup> However, Beijing’s efforts in Mexico have fallen short of expectations. Cooperation with local media is limited. Chinese state TV channels were available locally via satellite, cable, and free-to-air services from 2019 to 2021, and print copies of the regional magazine *China Today* were distributed. The local media outlet *Reforma* republished content from the *People’s Daily* on its website, while Chinese diplomats frequently contributed to major print media such as *El Financiero*, *Milenio*, and *El Universal*. The Chinese Embassy used Twitter and Facebook often. Media narratives generally promoted economic cooperation and solidarity during the pandemic and the Belt and Road Initiative.<sup>67</sup> Groups such as *Club Primera Plana* and the National Federation of Mexican Journalists sought to become platforms for increased journalist visits and exchanges with China and collaborated in a framework of cultural exchanges for cultural exchanges between Mexico and China. The National Federation of Mexican Journalists is seeking to have the National College of Journalism graduates included

in the International Federation of Belt and Road Journalists, organized by the Association of Journalists of the People's Republic of China.<sup>68</sup>

### Nicaragua

In February 2022, the son of Nicaragua's ruling dictatorial couple—Daniel Edmundo Ortega Murillo—media coordinator of the Council of Communication and Citizenship, signed a cooperative agreement between the state-owned Channel 6 and 19 Digital with the CMG, CCTV, the Television and Film Dubbing Centre, and the Xinhua News Agency. For sociologist Elvira Cuadra, this type of agreement aims to familiarize the population with China in political and social terms, leading to its acceptance. This is reminiscent of the 1980s when Soviet and Chinese programs were aired on state television during the Sandinista regime. In 2022, the pro-government Channel 4 began broadcasting a series of Chinese cultural advertisements during the news hour.<sup>69</sup>

### Brazil

Beijing's media influence in Brazil is significant and growing. Between 2019 and 2021, Chinese diplomacy and state media expanded their presence on social media. A CCP-owned publishing house works with local partners to publish the *China Hoje* newspaper in Brazil, and Chinese state television programming is available to Brazilian audiences through co-production agreements. The *China Daily* bought space to publish content in leading newspapers *Folha de Sao Paulo*, *Editora Globo*, and *Correio Brasiliense*.

Brazilian media representatives participated in regional cooperation forums organized by Chinese state media to centralize news production on China-related topics. Journalists subsidized to travel to China reported they were instructed to write positive news after their return.<sup>70</sup> Brazil's *Empresa Brasil de Comunicação* (EBC) and CMG signed a cooperation agreement in November 2019 to exchange content and technology, joint productions, cooperative broadcasts, and staff training. This expanded the cooperation between EBC and Chinese national radio (signed in 2015 and extended in 2017) to a five-year term. CMG President Shen Haixiong noted the initiative for this partnership came from Xi: "We have the important mission of deepening friendship and mutual understanding between peoples, as well as promoting exchange and cooperation in all fields." EBC President Luiz Carlos Pereira Gomes

said that joint coverage of journalistic events and programs such as public broadcasting promoted strategic social and cultural values for the country. He added, "If you have communication today, you have power."<sup>71</sup>

In September 2021, *TV Cultura* started cooperating with Xinhua to exchange information, documentaries, series, and cultural programs. President of the *Father Anchieta Foundation* José Roberto Maluf argued the agreement allowed *TV Cultura* to get "Information from the primary source, not from the alternative or secondary source ... We can know exactly how the Chinese think and what the Chinese say." Xinhua News Agency Director Chen Weihua mentioned in the agreement that the partnership "will help the two peoples know each other more and more." The Director of Network and New Business of *TV Cultura*, Fábio Borba, considered the partnership strategic because, in addition to accessing information, it represents an important rapprochement between two cultures.<sup>72</sup>

Shortly afterward, the Pernambuco Press Association (AIP) participated in a webinar organized by the Chinese Consulate in Recife. AIP President Múcio Aguiar spoke of the importance of the press as an information tool and cited journalistic cooperation and technology exchange projects with China, including journalists traveling from Pernambuco to China to understand the daily life of the Chinese press and the production of Chinese documentaries and special content broadcast in Pernambuco. He highlighted the initiative signed between the Pernambuco newspaper and Xinhua in March 2021, noting the presence of a news portal of the Chinese agency in the Brazilian newspaper "is an instrument of cooperation that strengthens the ties of friendship between China and Pernambuco [...] to transform Pernambuco into the capital of Chinese communication."

The Portuguese-Language Director of Xinhua, Chen Weihua, replied that his mission was to present China's stories worldwide—a true picture of the country. For his part, CCTV's Deputy General Director for Latin America, Li Weilin, commented that Brazil's programs on culture and diversity were successful and recalled commercial cooperation with the state government of Maranhão in 2018 and 2019. He concluded by pointing to a partnership with the media in Northeast Brazil to distribute materials to tell the "real" story of China.<sup>73</sup>

## Chile

In Chile, Chinese diplomats published op-eds and gave interviews in media across the political spectrum. The Chinese Embassy developed a social media presence between 2019 and 2021.<sup>74</sup> Some news outlets, such as *El Mercurio* and *América Economía*, occasionally publish content from Chinese state media. The newspaper *La Tercera* signed content-sharing agreements with CMG in 2020. Diaspora media influence in Chile was also significant and largely aligned with Beijing's narratives. Chinese Ambassador Niu Qingbao defended the safety and "high accessibility" of Chinese-made vaccines compared to the U.S. approach, framing the issue of vaccine efficacy as a geopolitical competition. The Xinhua News Agency and CMG, China's predominant state-controlled media company for radio and television broadcasting, offered free content to the Chilean media. Xinhua has a branch office in Santiago and at least one correspondent active in the country.

China-based companies linked to the CCP also gained a presence on social media. In 2020, TikTok was the most downloaded social media application in Chile. At the same time, there was a growing effort by the Chinese government to train Chilean journalists as part of a broader policy encompassing the region.<sup>75</sup>

During 2022 and 2023, Qingbao continued his propaganda activity steadily, and even increased it. In March 2022, in an interview with the newspaper *La Tercera*, he criticized statements made by U.S. Ambassador to Chile Bernadette Meehan (July 2022), who had warned about the risks of Chinese investments. The Chinese ambassador cautioned that the slanderous remarks made by some people in the United States about China-Chile relations were not new, and the true U.S. concern was the loss of control of Latin America. He also highlighted deepening cooperation on 5G communication, clean energy, smart cities, and other areas. He stressed that Huawei is not a threat to cyber security, but the United States is a threat to the world.<sup>76</sup>

In another interview the following month, he noted China's desire to promote infrastructure interconnection as part of the Belt and Road Initiative and support Chinese companies to actively participate in infrastructure cooperation, such as ports. He noted cultural, educational,

and academic ties and the importance of Chile as a partner of China. He stated that, in the future, both countries "have unlimited potential for win-win cooperation in clean energy, digital economy, new infrastructure, and many other areas."<sup>77</sup> In June 2022, he referred to the Ukraine-Russia conflict, saying the real intention of NATO's expansion around the Asia Pacific, or the creation of a NATO replica in the region, was to "defend the U.S.-led hegemonic system, which will harm the peace, stability, and development of the Asia Pacific and the world." He warned of the emergence of a new Cold War and that China would be reluctant to accept the United States or NATO doing to China in the East what it did to Russia in Europe. This meant that China did not want to be "encircled" by U.S. and European-driven blocs, a tacit reference to the case of Taiwan or disputed sovereignty in the South China Sea.<sup>78</sup>

Qingbao returned to these issues in November, affirming China's desire for a peaceful and stable Asia-Pacific region where "both China and Chile are members of the Asia-Pacific family."<sup>79</sup> In April 2023, he more aggressively accused the United States of undermining the status quo in the Taiwan Strait and endangering peace and stability in the area. The U.S. strategy in the Indo-Pacific "to contain China and for countries to act as 'pawns' of U.S. hegemony" was presented with the same goal.<sup>80</sup> A few days later, the ambassador argued that Chinese modernization would inject an even more powerful driving force into global economic recovery through the joint construction of the Belt and Road and the Global Development Initiative to promote "global openness, cooperation, and connectivity, and accelerate the implementation of the UN 2030 Agenda."<sup>81</sup>

## Panama

Eduardo Quirós, president of Grupo Editorial *El Siglo* and *La Estrella de Panamá*, and Yong En Li, director of the Chinese newspaper *El Expreso*, signed a business agreement in 2018. In August of that year, *El Siglo* and *La Estrella de Panamá* began to insert a section to provide official and general interest information related to China. Fujian Media Group and Panama National Television formally signed a memorandum in 2019 to broadcast each other's programs, exchange personnel, and other cooperative activities. They discussed international cultural exchange, film

and television broadcasting, and painting and sculpture. Several Panamanian media journalists also traveled to China for trainings to instill positive views of China. Consequently, Panama's traditional media was vulnerable to the influence of the CCP due to economic and political pressure. Chinese state media are also available in Panama on cable television, radio, and Spanish-language websites. The official Xinhua News Agency has an office and local correspondent in Panama City. Chinese diplomats in Panama—especially Chinese Ambassador Wei Qiang—have a strong Spanish-language presence on Twitter.<sup>84</sup>

### Colombia

In Colombia, Chinese media influence is minimal, although bilateral trade, direct investment, and public-private partnerships between the two countries have grown in recent years. Since 2020, under Chinese Ambassador Lan Hu, the Chinese Embassy has developed a sophisticated strategy of engagement with the Colombian media. Chinese diplomats promote their preferred narratives on controversial issues, such as China's early handling of the coronavirus, Hong Kong's restrictive national security legislation, and frictions around China-U.S. diplomatic and trade relations. CGTN and CCTV are available online or via satellite television, but Colombian audiences are limited. Chinese state media in Spanish, such as *Xinhua Español* and *Pueblo en Línea*, are also available online, although they target broader regional audiences. National media such as *El Tiempo*, *El Espectador*, *La República*, and the business magazine *Portafolio* sometimes publish free and paid content provided by Chinese diplomatic entities or state media.<sup>85</sup>

## SOCIAL MEDIA

In 2013, China started a massive English-language communication on Facebook. State media pages were created, giving the CCP access to around 100 million followers. As of 2020, one-third of these pages were pandemic related. However, the focus was divided between conveying positive stories, adjusting narratives if they were false or conspiratorial, and using advertisements to spread messages.<sup>86</sup> Research in 2013 by Gary King, Jennifer Pan, and Margaret Roberts<sup>87</sup> found that around 450 million comments were posted about the government, a large proportion on the government's websites. Approximately one in

178 social media posts on commercial sites were state made. The purpose is to flatter and distract the public on issues considered sensitive or dangerous to the government, such as the Hong Kong protests, Tiananmen Square, and domestic oppression of the Uighur ethnic community in Xinjiang.<sup>88</sup>

In 2018, the Chinese government launched a new campaign to detain Twitter users inside China and subsequently extended it to Chinese abroad. Government agents can detain the owners of these accounts or threaten their family members.<sup>89</sup> These apps include misinformation on topics such as the detention of Uighurs in Xinjiang, the 2019 protests in Hong Kong, and Russia's invasion of Ukraine. TikTok was also used to influence the U.S. public's views on U.S. politics.<sup>90</sup> Since 2019, pro-Beijing forces have begun using various manipulative actions on global social media platforms, adapting their tactics to maximize effectiveness.<sup>91</sup> The government uses high-tech censorship systems and official media reports, as well as social media platforms Weibo, WeChat, LeTV and, increasingly, Douyin (the Chinese version of TikTok) to increase internal and external ideological propaganda, censor information, distort facts, and alter narratives. The Cyberspace Affairs Commission and China's Central Propaganda Department are helping achieve this. Together, they directly employ some two million Chinese citizens and another 20 million civilian online volunteers to reach domestic and diaspora audiences.<sup>92</sup>

According to *Freedom on the Net*, a network of more than 80 researchers covering 70 countries organized by Freedom House, one of the first conclusions was that China has been the biggest abuser of internet freedom in the world since 2014. During the pandemic, internet freedom declined enormously, and censorship and surveillance were taken to unprecedented extremes as the government tightened its information controls in response to anti-government protests in Hong Kong and the coronavirus pandemic. Control over the state bureaucracy, media, religious groups, universities, businesses, and civil society associations was also tightened. Chinese technology companies systematically aided government surveillance by developing mandatory or semi-mandatory mobile phone propaganda and public health applications that collected data and transferred it to the authorities.<sup>93</sup>

China's authoritarian regime became increasingly repressive in all areas to consolidate Xi's power. Between June 2020 and May 2021, more mobile apps were blocked, unauthorized virtual private networks were pursued, and contacts between Chinese and foreign users were censored. Independent research into the origin of COVID-19 and criticism of Chinese-produced vaccines was obstructed, and journalists and activists were persecuted for reporting on the pandemic. Nationalist voices grew, as did attacks on those who spoke against the government line. The government passed new rules and laws that more strictly regulated how Chinese technology companies collected, stored, and shared user data.<sup>94</sup>

China stepped up censorship during the Beijing 2022 Olympics because of the pandemic and after tennis star Peng Shuai accused a senior CCP official of sexual assault. Platforms were forced to align themselves with Xi's ideology. Led by China and Russia, diplomats from authoritarian countries promoted a model of cyber sovereignty in multilateral institutions, such as the International Telecommunications Union. In July 2022, the Chinese authorities promoted the International Organization of the World Internet Conference to determine technical standards and an authoritarian model of digital control.<sup>95</sup> Access to information was limited to expand surveillance and intrusive new technologies, and for many countries to impose national internet laws, restricting the flow of information.<sup>96</sup> Critics of China and the CCP regularly faced cyberattacks, denial of service, and phishing, mainly targeting Chinese media and exile communities abroad.<sup>97</sup>

For example, the only state-controlled internet service provider in Cuba, ETECSA, used Huawei technology to block the independent news website *CubaNet*, among others. While readers could circumvent the blocks through virtual private networks, many media outlets had to move to other sites or social networks.<sup>98</sup> The laws the Cuban regime uses to regulate telecommunications and cybersecurity are, in practice, more focused on citizen control than justice or welfare. Decree-Law 370, passed in 2019, criminalizes dissent and independent internet activism, and Decree-Law 35, passed in 2021, legalizes general internet blackouts. In July 2021, Beijing helped quell protests against Cuban President Miguel Díaz-Canel. Internet and

telephone services were cut off, disconnecting connections outside the island thanks to the actions of Chinese companies Huawei, TP-Link, and ZTE, which also helped construct Cuba's telecommunications infrastructure.<sup>99</sup> Cuba was one of only two Latin American countries in which the government cut off the internet to its citizens in 2022.<sup>100</sup>

On April 3, 2023, the governments of Cuba and China signed a cybersecurity cooperation agreement.<sup>101</sup> ETECSA remains the only telecommunications company allowed in Cuba. By order of the government, it produces general blackouts amid protests and selective censorship targeted at specific individuals. The agreement between the two countries aims to prevent and combat cyber threats and promote the development of the cybersecurity industry.<sup>102</sup> In May, Cuba's National Assembly approved the Law on Social Communication, which maintains state control over the media, regulates content, and disregards the independent press as a legal entity. The legislation prohibits disseminating information that could "destabilize the socialist state" in the media and cyberspace and grants legality only to media linked to the state or the CCP. Numerous citizens have been sentenced to prison for their social media postings. In February 2023, the Cuban Institute for Freedom of Expression and the Press counted at least 508 violent arrests or harassment against journalists on the island in 2022.<sup>103</sup>

In Venezuela, the identity system called the *Carnet de la Patria* was established with Chinese technology firm ZTE (a company identified by the United States as a national security risk)<sup>104</sup> in 2016 and was accused of collecting data on its users, a form of citizen control used to label those identified as part of the opposition. Certain geographic sectors of the country are monitored by Chinese personnel who provide reports to the government of Nicolás Maduro, who then considers censorship, internet blackouts, and arrests.<sup>105</sup>

In 2020, *RTVC Sistema de Medios Públicos de Colombia* signed a partnership with Classic Media Films China Latina, a company dedicated to producing audiovisual works (TV series, documentaries, films, and TV programs) at its headquarters in Chongqing, China. Classic Media Films China Latina's General Director, Hu Wen

Bo, stressed that "through these programs, the way is opened to show Chinese culture abroad and to be the bridge of communication and cooperation between the two countries."<sup>106</sup> The representative of China's communication office, Zhi Liming, and Ecuadorian production company *En el Ojo Films'* Director Nicolás Cornejo, signed an agreement to promote audiovisual products in December 2016. Cornejo explained that although China did not have private media, it had production companies that passed through the state filter: "The objective is for many of these productions to expand to the region."<sup>107</sup>

A May 2021 study by the Oxford Internet Institute and Associated Press documented 26,879 Twitter accounts that amplified posts by Chinese diplomats or state media nearly 200,000 times before being suspended by the platform for violating rules prohibiting manipulation. Similarly, according to Google's quarterly reports, 10,570 channels were removed for engaging in coordinated influence operations linked to China between January and September 2021. YouTube appears to be the platform of choice for China-linked propaganda and disinformation campaigns, although the presence of Chinese official and state media on Twitter and Facebook garners more attention. Alongside the campaigns on social media platforms owned by U.S. companies, new examples of how China-based companies such as Xiaomi, Huawei, or *StarTimes* are infusing their technology exports with propaganda, selective censorship, or surveillance capabilities appear every month. An extensive pro-Beijing multilingual propaganda network closely followed by research company Graphika reached Spanish-speaking LAC audiences in 2021. Many of the accounts linked to this campaign interacted primarily with the Twitter accounts of business people, Chinese officials, and other left-wing Latin American commentators.<sup>109</sup>

According to a 2022 report by the Brookings Institution and the Alliance for Securing Democracy, Chinese state media use search engine optimization strategies to place sensitive news about the country at the top of search results pages outside China. Google Search and YouTube are banned in China. Microsoft's Bing operates in China but suspends some elements of its service to comply with Chinese law.<sup>110</sup> Another form of communication is the messaging system WeChat, which is popular with users inside and outside China. Most of the news on this system

comes from Xinhua, *Global Times*, CGTN, and other state media. There is no privacy protection offered, so the Chinese government extensively monitors and censors content on the platform.<sup>111</sup>

On March 16, 2023, the Information Office of the State Council (Cabinet) published a white paper, "China's Law-Based Cyberspace Governance in the New Era," which aims to develop a comprehensive system of laws and regulations and an efficient enforcement system for the "new era," as highlighted by the Chinese website CRI. It says it will promote strict supervision and effective support for cyberspace and its more than one billion users in China. China's Vice Minister of Cyberspace Administration Cao Shumin said this is due to the government's effort to "combat cybercrime and intensify efforts to curb misinformation, cyber violence, abuse of algorithms [...] to promote a safe, fair, clean and civilized online environment for the people."<sup>112</sup>

Still, there is a strong Chinese interest in LAC. Using the digital economy and associated technologies is a key objective to expand Chinese influence, as stated in the Global Development Initiative (GDI).<sup>113</sup> Latin America is the region with the highest number of channels specifically dedicated to talking about China in Spanish, with 46.3 percent, followed by China with 27 percent and Spain with 22 percent. However, China has the largest number of followers, followed by Argentina and Spain. The main topic combines current affairs and Chinese culture with additional content on politics, history, daily life, consumption, and gastronomy. Instagram and Twitter have more channels, while Facebook and TikTok have more followers. For example, the page with the most subscribers (2,500,000) is *Sienta China* on Facebook.<sup>114</sup>

The China-Celac plan (2022-2024)<sup>115</sup> prioritized China's engagement with the region in a wide range of digital sectors. Xinhua, *People's Daily* newspapers, and China Radio International produce daily content in Spanish and Portuguese. China Central Television (CCTV) has a 24-hour channel, CGTN Spanish, available online, free of charge. *China Today* magazine, in addition to continuing to print the newspaper, has two Spanish-language websites. Almost all these media have Spanish-language accounts on social networks banned in China, such as Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube.<sup>116</sup>

## RECOMMENDATIONS

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- China's media strategy in LAC relies on local media—Chinese media conglomerates increased their number of bureaus in the region, and Chinese diplomats placed articles in local newspapers to make their policy positions known. The U.S. Department of State's Foreign Press Center should boost the number of local journalists participating in "International Reporting Tours." For this program, U.S. embassies choose journalists from around the world to report on a specified topic in the United States. While there, they also receive training and exposure to U.S. media outlets. More journalists should have the opportunity to participate in this program, which allows them to experience U.S. newspapers, correspondents, staff and news exchanges, courses, research grants, and ad buys.
- Local media—journalists, researchers, and academics—should denounce Chinese manipulation in LAC, in partnership with US peers. This would demonstrate cooperation and allow the information to be presented in each country or region's precise language and idioms. Foreign affiliates of U.S. newspapers would play a key role.
- Several Latin American and Caribbean media organizations are looking for opportunities to establish agreements with U.S. and other international media houses and thus distribute news and cultural material created and produced in the United States. Despite its criticisms and prejudices toward the United States, Latin Americans generally like U.S. films, television series, and cultural and musical productions. Supporting the free dissemination of cultural platforms, programs, and movies on various topics is an enormous soft power that the United States is not taking full advantage of. Radio programs in English and Spanish would be another channel for rapprochement. Many diasporas have one or two hours a week to talk about news and culture in their home country. The Chinese media influence in Chile, Bolivia, Argentina, and Panama is alarming.
- News outlets in LAC (and worldwide) are facing tighter budgets and stiffer competition from other media sites and are eager to get

free content from elsewhere. When Chinese media houses offer that, it is difficult to refuse. To counter this, the United States could encourage big name media houses like NBC, CBS, and ABC to share free news content or donate old media equipment to cash-strapped news agencies abroad.

- The United States should also increase funding to the International Consortium of Investigative Journalism and the Caribbean Investigative Journalism Network to boost the capacity of investigative journalists.
- Sports are an excellent tool to bring the United States and LAC closer. Baseball and basketball are popular sports in many LAC countries, including Venezuela, Cuba, and Brazil and could be used as a channel to bring cultural and even political positions closer. Soccer in South America is specifically relevant and is growing in popularity in the United States. By inviting more famous athletes, artists, singers, and scientists to visit the region and funding more sports, art, and music diplomacy programs, the United States will continue to leverage its comparative advantage. The U.S. Department of State has the infrastructure to conduct these programs with its Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs.

Chess schools could be created in Latin America, for example, since the United States has one of the best teams. Chess would be a fascinating education channel, especially now that a Chinese player has become the world champion. (The example of Bobby Fischer playing a world championship match against Boris Spassky comes to mind).

## CONCLUSIONS

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Chinese Communist Party propaganda seeks to influence policy in LAC with intensity and greater success than in other parts of the world due to the region's economic needs. This is particularly the case for those countries with high levels of instability (Argentina, Venezuela, and the Caribbean, in general) or those oriented toward socialist ideology (Cuba, Nicaragua, and Venezuela). To this end, all kinds of affirmative and positive stories about Chinese progress and intentions were disseminated, even if many were false or omitted and censored issues considered "sensitive" or purely "national." The

Chinese government pours billions of dollars into deploying this strategy, as Chinese media alone would have been insufficient to achieve this goal. China brought in foreign media and journalists, internationalized propaganda apparatuses, and launched a diplomatic, political, and communications campaign to defuse potential and concrete criticism of the Chinese government, parties, and leaders.

Chinese and its local propaganda and communication strategy hailed this initiative as a new era for humanity. Media outlets such as Xinhua, Global Times, CGTN, and other digital media supported the Belt and Road Initiative and GDI as vast spaces for "cooperation," while China's insatiable quest for primary and energy resources, plus the financing of infrastructure, are transforming China into the world's leading economic power.

One of China's most critical and centralized propaganda powers is its Cyberspace Affairs Commission and Central Propaganda Department. In addition to Chinese workers, they employ millions of online civilian volunteers who influence and magnify the government's message. They also serve as a shock force against critics and detractors. Added to this "censorship army" are other technological and propagandistic means of censorship in official media and social platforms (Weibo, WeChat, and LeTV), which, in addition to the above, change the narrative so what is good and right are always on the side of the Chinese government. While such accounts on foreign (U.S.) apps such as Twitter, Google, YouTube, and Facebook were found and removed, many accounts on these platforms are still functional and exert enormous online weight as censors and curators of thought and discourse. This is compounded by Chinese companies such as Xiaomi, Huawei, and the StarTimes that distribute propaganda, selective censorship, and even surveillance capabilities with their technological products. LAC leads the world ranking of channels dedicated to China in Spanish on generic topics, although always with a positive view of the country. China's limit in LAC is wherever the United States places it. Otherwise, it will continue monopolizing communication, raw materials and, finally, territories.

Media influence is crucial in winning hearts and minds in Latin America and the Caribbean. Confronting China in this field is as essential as modernizing the military or developing and projecting economic power. Thousands of people read or hear false information about China and accept it as truth. If this distorted propaganda is not confronted sooner rather than later, half of the news in LAC will be about the goodness, cooperation, and friendship of the Chinese communist regime and the problems the United States causes on the continent, even if the reality is the reverse.

## END NOTES

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