

The many sources of disinformation in the Australia - China relationship

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'Disinformation' is the new buzzword in Australia's discussion of China. It refers to the intentional spreading of false information to manipulate an audience. And the spotlight is being shone on Beijing as the chief culprit.

In a June 16 [speech](#) at the National Security College of the Australian National University, Australia's Foreign Minister, Marise Payne, called out China (and Russia) as having 'carried out targeted disinformation campaigns seeking to undermine democratic debate and exacerbate social polarisation, and improve their own image in the COVID-19 context'.

Minister Payne referenced the findings of a European Commission [report](#) issued the previous week, as well as Twitter removing 32,000 accounts attributed to state-linked information operations, remarking it was 'troubling that some countries are using the pandemic to undermine liberal democracy to promote their own more authoritarian models'.

So concerned is the Australian government by disinformation from China that a new unit will soon be [established](#) in the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade to combat it.

Some of the urgency is curious because to the extent that Beijing has sought to 'improve its own image' – one of the aims of China's disinformation campaign according to Minister Payne – there is little evidence to suggest it has been successful.

According to the *2020 Lowy Poll*, the proportion of Australians who 'trust [China] to act responsibly in the world' has [crashed](#) from 52 percent to 23 percent over the past two years. And on COVID-19 specifically, 69 percent of Australians think that China handled the outbreak badly. This compared with just seven percent who said the same of Australia.

In terms of elite opinion, an analysis [piece](#) on June 12 in the *South China Morning Post* observed that '[Australian] voices urging understanding of China's position have all but evaporated from a national conversation that has long been informed by both hawkish and dovish sentiment'.

Nonetheless, that still leaves attempts by Beijing to 'undermine democratic debate and exacerbate social polarisation', the two other aims according to Minister Payne.

The Chinese Communist Party has form here. In 2017 it was [reported](#) that a visiting Chinese official had told Labor party leaders it would be a shame if the Chinese government had to tell the Chinese community in

Australia that Labor did not support the bilateral relationship because of its opposition to an extradition treaty between the two countries.

The heartening news here is that social divisions vulnerable to exploitation are also within the capacity of the Australian government to manage. For example, as Adam Ni and Yun Jiang from the China Policy Centre observed in a recent [submission](#) to a parliamentary inquiry into ‘Foreign Interference Through Social Media’, rather than conceiving Chinese-Australian communities as a vector of Beijing’s disinformation campaigns, they are frequently the target. Accordingly, the appropriate Australian response is to ‘protect their rights as any other Australians, and treat them as a national asset and not a liability’.

Minister Payne’s speech was also notable for the selectivity of the disinformation examples that were included. A paragraph along the lines of the one below probably wasn’t even considered for the first draft:

‘Now let me [be] clear: disinformation doesn’t just come from autocracies. In recent months we have seen senior figures in the United States government spread conspiracy theories about how COVID-19 supposedly escaped from a Chinese laboratory. Australian intelligence agencies have [confirmed](#) they are unable to find any evidence supporting such claims. Even more alarming is that a US State Department document showcasing such theories was [dressed](#) up as ‘Five Eyes intelligence’ and laundered through an Australian media organisation last month. Pro-Chinese government bots on Twitter are one thing. But when the front page of a major Sydney newspaper carries unfounded accusations that have the potential to incite attacks against Asian Australians, our determination to push back is even greater’.

Disinformation can also come from within the legislative branch of the Australian government.

In April, the National Party Member for Dawson in Queensland, George Christensen set up a [website](#) that urges readers to ‘speak up on China’s economic infiltration of our nation’. To egg them on, Christensen makes a number of claims, including that ‘Communist China is Australia’s largest foreign investor. They use their investments in Australia to guarantee a supply to China, also off-shoring both profits and tax. Government-owned businesses also do the bidding of the Chinese Communist Party in Australia’.

There is not a single data [source](#) that comes close to substantiating this. Last month the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) released new data for 2019 that [showed](#) China was Australia’s ninth largest foreign investment source, accounting for just two percent of the total. The share of the US was 26 percent. If Christensen doubts the quality of the ABS data, the US embassy in Canberra, as well as nearly every visiting senior American political leader, do not. These sources have long [trumpeted](#) the fact that because the US owns more Australian assets by a large margin than any other country, Washington, not Beijing, is ‘Australia’s [most important economic partner](#)’.

Yet Minister Payne’s speech also said nothing about her Coalition colleague’s blatant disinformation. Meanwhile, Christensen regularly pushes such falsehoods on Australian TV screens, radio airwaves and social media feeds. Never mind the backlash that could result from allowing these claims to go unchallenged, such as abuse directed at Asian Australians doing something as mundane as attending an auction to put in a bid for a family home.

There’s nothing wrong with plainly calling out disinformation from Beijing. But disinformation needs to be recognised and resisted when it comes from allies and at home as well.

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