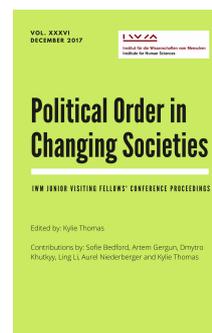


Transparency, Propaganda and Disinformation: “Managing” Anticorruption Information in China

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In corruption studies, transparency is often discussed as a quality of public services or public administration, a quality that helps to reduce corruption. This is not what this article focuses on, however. Instead, the focus of this article is the quality of the access to information related to corruption and anticorruption in China and how that affects our understanding about corruption. In this article, such information includes both factual and propagandistic information, the two of which are very often intermeshed and lumped together for presentation. For this reason, it is even more important for us to be aware of this distinction in the discussion.

The rest of this article is organized as follows. The first part examines definitional and other general issues surrounding the concept of transparency. This is followed by an examination of the specific types of information that are used in China’s anticorruption activities. The article then offers a brief introduction of the various anticorruption institutions in China. The next part looks at the mass media institutions and the censorship regime in China and is followed by an examination of the distribution of factual anticorruption information and the production of China’s anticorruption propaganda and disinformation.

Conceptualization of transparency

In current studies, transparency is almost always associated with good governance and accountability.[2] However, few advocates of transparency have taken the trouble to provide a definition of this popular term. In this article, transparency is treated as the quality of the environment where information related to the delivery of public services is provided. More specifically, it involves the following conceptual issues.

Firstly, transparency concerns the access to information about actions that take place in a space which is, unless a certain privilege is granted, usually cordoned off from people who are not directly involved in carrying out those actions. Such access, in its fullest form,

allows the information seekers to enter the space where actions take place. For example, in military actions, journalists may be allowed to “embed” in the task force that carries out a mission so that they can observe the actions as they take place. When it is impractical for the observers to be physically present in places where actions of interest take place or for the event organizer to accommodate a disproportionately large number of attendees in a limited space, direct access can also be granted to observers remotely, for example, by televising or webcasting the events. Such access to live events might be deemed the highest form of transparency.

Secondly, the degree of transparency shall be assessed by the quality of autonomy granted to the information seeker, i.e. their degree of freedom to choose the focus of their attention. Therefore, the direct entrance type of access mentioned above such as physical access to live events offers the highest autonomy to the information seeker, unless these live events are staged. Access to written, audio and/or video records of past events is less transparent because they reduce the autonomy of information seekers by confining the range of their focus of attention only to the archival materials provided. It also gives the information provider the opportunity to omit unfavorable information or even, in extreme cases, to doctor information. This record-only type of access generally indicates a lower degree of transparency compared with access to live events. Total absence of access equates to complete opacity.

Thirdly, the degree of transparency should also be assessed by the tangible and intangible obstacles that one must overcome in order to obtain the information. Tangible obstacles include, for example, limiting the number of seats in the public gallery of a court room, setting up a pay wall for online information and releasing the information only upon approval of a formal request. Intangible obstacles refer to the amount of mental effort or costs entailed in seeking the information, for example, presenting the information with unexplained jargon and in complex sentence structures, which effectively renders the information incomprehensible to non-expert readers, even when physical access to the information is not barred.

Fourthly, questions can be raised as to the limit of transparency. Just the same as the fact that transparency does not always make the strongest social skill for an individual person, it might be counterproductive in some circumstances for public institutions to conduct their business in a completely transparent manner. For example, in the context of an anticorruption investigation, especially when covert actions are involved, it might be self-defeating if all investigative information is immediately made available to the public since it could inform the suspect who might then destroy evidence or abscond before being arrested. Therefore, it is not uncommon that investigative information is withheld from the public while the investigation is ongoing and only published partially at a later stage.

In short, transparency is more about the *how* than the *what*. Specifically, transparency concerns whether certain actions are taken by public institutions so that any interested parties can observe the operation of these institutions as their actions take place in real time or examine them based on well documented records. Transparency, therefore, as a value, is different from other values that are essential for good governance, such as equality, efficiency and fairness, which are defined and can be assessed only by looking

into *what* exactly the actions are. Not only is transparency a different value, it is also a prerequisite to the realization of other values, including those mentioned above, since without access to information about the actions concerned, it is impossible to evaluate other qualities of these actions. Having laid out the theoretical foundation, in the next section of this article, I will discuss the meaning of transparency in the context of anticorruption activities in the People's Republic of China (hereafter China).

Types of anticorruption information

As mentioned above, transparency is a precondition for the actualization and assessment of other values which are fundamental for public services. It is also the first step to establishing credibility of public policies. Credibility means, according to the Oxford Dictionary, "the quality of being trusted and believed in", which, in colloquial terms, means that one's words match his or her deeds. A policy or decision is credible when its targeted groups believe that the authority will carry out what it sets out to carry out. It is important for policy-makers to establish such credibility of their policies because when a policy is seen to be credible, that in turn will generate voluntary compliance and hence reduce the cost of enforcement.

Nothing is more important than keeping the decision-making process transparent for the establishment of credibility of a public policy. This is because if the process of decision-making is kept opaque, speculation and conspiracy theories will grow, which can cultivate distrust and cynicism towards the integrity of the public institutions. For example, when anticorruption activities are conducted in secrecy, people may speculate about possible ulterior motives of the anticorruption institutions and withdraw their cooperation or support for their activities. More specifically, transparency in anticorruption activities concerns access to the following types of information:

Laws and regulations

Anticorruption institutions should provide information regarding both the substantive and procedural rules governing their anticorruption activities. The substantive rules should include the standards that they apply to determine what kind of conduct is deemed to be "corrupt" and consequently subject to punishment. It should also provide information about the factors that will determine the severity of punishment. Procedural rules include the procedures and protocols that are followed by anticorruption institutions in the investigation, examination, prosecution and adjudication of any allegation of corrupt conduct. It will also boost the credibility of the anticorruption institutions if information regarding their organizational structures, personnel information and *modus operandi* are made available to the public.

Individual cases

In addition to general rules, it is equally important for anticorruption institutions to be transparent about their handling of individual cases in order to enhance the credibility of their anticorruption efforts. Barring circumstances involving covert investigative operations, information regarding the investigation, prosecution and adjudication of

individual cases should be made available first to the suspects under investigation and their legal representatives in order to protect the individual rights of suspects and to prevent anticorruption institutions from abusing their power. If an investigation has led to a trial, trial records should be made available not only to the parties to the case but also to the public, detailing “what is being done, how and why actions take place, who is involved, and by what standards decisions are made”.^[3]

Statistics

In this article, statistics refers to the collection, presentation, analysis and interpretation of masses of original data relating to corrupt conduct and alleged culprits. Such data includes corruption-related complaints, biographical information of the offenders, specifics of corrupt conduct as well as other circumstantial information such as the political, economic and cultural environment of the place where corruption is committed. Collecting and analyzing such data helps to identify patterns of corrupt conduct, its attributing factors, to assess the effectiveness of anticorruption policies and to assess and improve the performance of anticorruption institutions. Since this data is controlled by anticorruption institutions, it is in the public interest for these institutions to make such information available to the public.

Anticorruption institutions in China

In China, a number of institutions are responsible for carrying out anticorruption activities and hence “produce” and “possess” information directly related to anticorruption activities. The Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) reviewed specialized anti-corruption institutions in various countries and identified three models: specialized anticorruption institutions in law enforcement, specialized institutions on preventive measures, policy development and co-ordination, and specialized institutions with all above functions.^[4] The Chinese “model” is so complex that it defies such categorization. Firstly, unlike most other countries, China has a single-party or party-state political system, which means that the Chinese Communist Party (the “Party”), with its political monopoly, can extend its pervasive influence to all state institutions, including those that are responsible for anticorruption activities.^[5] Therefore, the Party can monitor and interfere in decision making of state anticorruption institutions.^[6] Secondly, the Party also creates its own institutions that are directly involved in anticorruption activities, especially regarding anticorruption policy-making and investigation. Thirdly, the Party also formulates anticorruption policies, which state anticorruption institutions are required to follow. In short, both Party and state institutions participate in anticorruption activities in China separately and jointly.

Party institutions

Firstly, a brief introduction to the institutional structure of the Party. At local levels, Party standing committees are factually the highest governing body of the Party in their respective regions. They are generalist institutions and responsible for monitoring and supervising the work of state institutions in all sectors by sending instructions to and/or approving decisions proposed by state institutions on all important public affairs within

their geographic boundaries. Under a highly centralized structure, a local Party standing committee answers to the Party standing committee at the next superior administrative level, i.e. from the country, prefectural, provincial to the national/central level, in ascending order. At the national/central level, the highest governing body is further divided into two layers: Politburo and the Politburo Standing Committee.

As generalist institutions, each of these Party standing committees has an all-inclusive mandate, including to direct, oversee and supervise anticorruption work conducted by specialized anticorruption institutions either in the Party or the state. Specifically, such a mandate consists of the formulation of anticorruption policies and the supervision of their implementation, including investigating, examining and making decisions regarding individual corruption-related violations. However, as generalist institutions, these governing bodies only have limited amount of attention that can be extended to anticorruption activities and hence their role in this area is more selective. Routine anticorruption work is instead carried out by the specialized Party anticorruption institutions: the Chinese Communist Party central and local discipline and inspection commissions (the “CCDI” and “local CDIs”).

The CCDI works under the Politburo and the Politburo Standing Committee. Under the CCDI, local CDIs are subject to the dual leadership of the CDI at the next higher level and the Party standing committee at the same level. According to the Party Charter, the current main focus of the CCDI and CDIs is to collect information from the public, to conduct pre-prosecution investigation of corrupt conduct of party members and to coordinate amongst various anti-corruption agencies.[7] Since the CDIs can only exercise jurisdiction over party-members, the People’s Inspection Committee was established in 1949 at both the national and local levels to scrutinize disciplinary violation of civil servants, who were not Party members.[8] The committee was dismantled in 1959 and then restored in the carnation of the Ministry of Inspection (the “MOI”) in 1986.[9] In 1993 the MOI was merged into the CCDI, the two of which share the same personnel and facilities but carry out activities under their respective offices.[10] In general, the CCDI and CDIs currently exercise preemptive power to determine, when the suspect is a ranked official, whether an investigation should be initiated and then whether a prosecution should be pursued.

State institutions

At present, state institutions responsible for anticorruption activities are the People’s Procuratorates and People’s Courts. The People’s Procuratorates have the mandate to both investigate and prosecute corruption-related crimes. More specifically, a specialized branch of the procuratorates, the Anti-Embezzlement and Bribery Bureau (the “AEBB”), carries out routine investigations of corruption-related crimes. Evidently, the AEBB and the CDIs overlap in their corruption investigation jurisdiction. In practice, these two institutions often work collaboratively, although the CDIs generally outrank the procuratorates and enjoy higher authority. Depending on the rank of the suspect, when a lead is first acquired by the procuratorate, the procuratorate is required to inform and seek for instructions from the CDI or the Party Standing Committee at the same level if the lead implicates an official of a rank equal or higher than that of the procuratorate. On

the other hand, the CDIs are generally understaffed and their personnel lack proper training, so they often borrow investigators from the procuratorates to conduct investigations on a case by case basis.

Other than the AEBC, the White-collar Crime Prevention Bureau (the “WCPB”), was also established as a department within the procuratorates. Its function mainly concerns prevention-oriented corruption-related research, consultation and training. Apart from the WCPB, the National Bureau of Corruption Prevention (the “NBCP”), established in 2007 under the directorship of the Minister of Inspection, is also responsible for the prevention of corruption.[11] There is no clear division of labour between the two institutions.[12]

New institutional development

In 2016, the Party launched a pilot program to create a new party-state joint institution in the name of National Supervision Commission (the “NSC”).[13] Under this new institution, corruption-related investigative activities of both the CDIs and the procuratorates will be merged. At the time of writing, pilot programs are authorized in three locations, namely the Beijing municipality, Shannxi Province and Zhejiang Province. By the end of 2017, the program is expected to be extended nationwide.[14] Full implementation of this program will impact significantly upon the methods and approaches used in anticorruption investigations but little upon the regulatory regime of corruption-related information, which is the focus of the next section.

Mass media and information censorship regime

China has an expansive centrally controlled censorship regime that monitors and filters information before public circulation. Censoring institutions monitor and examine the contents of information carried by any forms of mass media outlets, including the print, broadcast and digital media. The most important censorship organ is the Central Propaganda Department of the Party (the “CPD”). The CPD is a functional division of the Central Party Committee that is specialized in censorship and propaganda. It, together with a number of state regulatory bodies, has the mandate not only to formulate and implement nationwide censorship and propaganda policies but also to issue direct instructions on what to report, what not to report and how to report specific public events to editorial teams of media institutions.[15] This superior-subordinate relationship between the Party propaganda departments and media institutions is safeguarded by the subjection of all mass media institutions to the supervision of the Party through a number of means, including ownership, licensing requirements, and legal measures.

The CPD and its branches conduct day-to-day censorship activities via two main approaches: ex-ante and ex-post supervision. The ex-ante supervision is conducted by the CPD censors who send specific instructions to editors on reporting policies regarding specific events as they unfold or by in-house censors stationed within media institutions who examine the news items before they are published or aired. Ex-post supervision is to apply sanctions to media institutions or individual editors and/or reporters for violations that have slipped through the net of ex-ante supervision.[16]

Since the rapid marketization of media institutions in the 1990s, the censorship regime has become more intricately layered. Large-sized media conglomerates were established which host both daily newspapers that are solely owned and directly run by the Party and market-oriented metropolitan newspapers or business magazines, which are allowed to have more relaxed editorial policies. While the former remains the mouthpiece of the Party, the latter are allowed to have a more autonomous editorial team, covering a wider spectrum of social and economic issues that are of interest to readers. Some of these magazines, enjoying a pocket of air of oxygen to report freely, became the incubators of investigative journalism, for instance the Southern Weekend, *Caijing* and *Caixin* magazines, which have pioneered in-depth reporting on corruption-related affairs.

Factual anticorruption information

In this article, the term “factual information” is used in contrast to “propagandistic information”. Factual information refers to information concerning the facts of corruption and anticorruption conduct and practices, whilst propagandistic information intimates a more subjective characterization of such conduct and practices. A typical example of the former is the actual texts of corruption-related laws and regulations whilst a typical example of the latter is an editorial opinion on the political significance of the making of such laws and regulations. This is not to suggest that propagandistic information is necessarily false. In fact, propagandistic information is often weaved together with edited factual information and the distinction between the two is becoming more blurred. In China, most of the factual anticorruption information is released by anticorruption institutions themselves and distributed by official mass media.

Laws and regulations

China is no longer a state of lawless totalitarianism where people are punished without any reference to laws and regulatory rules. Since legal reforms started in the 1980s, significant improvement has been made, historically speaking, in terms of the timely release of legislative information. All corruption-related laws and by-laws are published simultaneously on the websites of all anticorruption institutions and announced in various news outlets. Access to corruption-related regulations was more restricted in the past. In recent years, more efforts have been made to increase transparency in Party affairs. The main area that has benefited from this transparency initiative concerns the publication and dissemination of Party rules and regulations, including those related to anticorruption activities. Such rules and regulations are usually first published on the website of the CCDI and simultaneously announced as news items by the official mass media.

Individual cases

Unlike the reporting of laws and regulations, reporting of the investigation of individual corruption scandals is heavily censored. Of all content disseminated in the mass media, news items related to corruption are the most censored. And journalistic reports implicating unlawful conduct of Party leaders are the most sensitive of all subjects. Although the degree of intensity of censorship may vary at different times and under

different administrations, news media institutions are generally forbidden to conduct independent investigative reporting of corruption scandals regarding ranked public officials who are still in office. It means that only after an official investigation has been concluded and disciplinary action been taken by the Party can stories on the case be published. This in turn means that coverage of corruption scandals in the mass media always goes hand in hand with the coverage of anticorruption activities. This is because as a general editorial principle negative news is not to be reported unless the issue concerned has been previously resolved internally.

Amongst various types of media, the official newspapers are the main conduit of corruption-related news, especially those newspapers or magazines run by the various anticorruption institutions. For example, the CCDI publishes the *China Discipline and Inspection Newspaper* 中国纪检监察报, *Discipline and Inspection* magazine 纪检监察杂志; the Supreme People's Procuratorate publishes the *Procuratorate's Daily, Democracy and Rule by Law* magazine and the Supreme People's Court the *Legal Daily*. Once an investigation of a corruption case is completed, anticorruption institutions may invite reporters from trusted newspapers or magazines, typically, the above affiliated media, to cover the story, granting them access to case files, investigators and/or the offender.

In addition to the official newspapers, a number of commercial newspapers and news magazines have become known for their more independent investigative reporting on business misdeeds and official corruption. Apart from *Caijing* and *Caixin* magazines mentioned above, *News Weekly* and *Xinjingbao* are also among the more well-known. Although these newspapers and magazines are also subject to heavy censorship, their editorial management enjoys more autonomy and their practice of journalism is more professional, compared with the official daily newspapers run directly by the Party. This means, on the other hand, that they do not normally enjoy the same privileged access to the information withheld by anticorruption institutions as official media institutions have. Nevertheless, they can produce insightful exposé pieces based on publicly available data, interviews with witnesses and expert analysis,^[17] except that the space of their autonomy is quite precarious and can be taken away any time if and when they lose political backing from their patrons.

With all the obstacles considered, the investigative reporting by *Caijing* and later *Caixin* magazines in many ways is remarkable. Both magazines have published numerous exclusive stories on corruption scandals over the years. For example, when the CCDI announced its decision to detain Zhou Yongkang (a former Politburo Standing Committee member, so far the Party leader of the highest ranking who was disgraced for corruption-related charges) for investigation, *Caixin* magazine published an exclusive profile of the family of Zhou Yongkang on the very day that the decision was announced.^[18]

It was believed that *Caixin* enjoys privileged access to anticorruption information because of the good personal relationship between its editor-in-chief Hu Shuli and the head of the CCDI, Wang Qishan as well as the PRC president Xi Jinping.^[19] For example, in its most recent exclusive story on Xi Xiaoming, a former vice-president of the Supreme People's Court convicted for corruption, *Caixin* was able to obtain the court judgement of the case that seems not made available to other media outlets and certainly not the public.

Nevertheless, even with such privileged connection with anticorruption institutions, the extent of information that a reporter from *Caixin* can obtain and report is still limited for a number of reasons. To start with, corruption trials are dominated by the prosecution and the defence is restricted in their freedom to conduct independent investigations and to contest the evidence presented by the prosecution. Secondly, the court judgment does not provide sufficient reasoning to explain how facts are established, characterized and how laws are applied on a level that can be deemed as adequate in other legal systems under the principle of the rule of law. Lastly, court judgement reveals little information regarding the process through which a decision is reached. Most of the process information is included in a separate court dossier 副卷, which is classified and unavailable even to the parties of a litigation.[20]

Therefore, the process of anticorruption decision making is by and large kept opaque, especially regarding the investigative phase taken place in the CDIs. Currently, the CDIs only announce summary information of its disciplinary actions, such as the date when an investigation is launched or when a disciplinary sanction is applied. Internal reports that are used as the basis of the disciplinary decisions, such as the investigative report, the case-examination report and the final recommendation report, are never disclosed. The often-used subterfuge for conducting its business in such secrecy is that the CDIs are not state institutions and their activities only concern internal affairs of the Party. This argument is deeply problematic considering the scope and the magnitude of the Party's involvement in the decision making of all state affairs in the country.

Transparency improves, with great limitations, after a case has been transferred by the CDIs to the state legal institutions for prosecution and trial. At this stage, the accused would enjoy the right to counsel and more information related to the charges will be disclosed to the defense. However, when a corruption case goes to trial, the court room is generally cordoned off from the public and mass media. Hence, it was unprecedented when the Jinan Intermediate Court decided to live broadcast the trial of Bo Xilai, a former Politburo member accused of corruption. The transcripts of the trial were "tweeted" out to the public live, albeit with a few minutes of delay, through Weibo, a Chinese Twitter-like social media platform. During the week of Bo's trial, millions of Weibo users were glued to their computer monitors or mobile phones to receive updates of the court proceedings. Later when the court convicted Bo, a full-length court decision was also disseminated to the public. At that time, many thought that the "Weibo-cast" of Bo Xilai's case would mark the beginning of an era of judicial transparency. Many are left disappointed.

Since the new administration took office in late 2012, an anticorruption campaign of an unprecedented scale and scope was launched. More corruption investigations were conducted in the last five years than the previous forty years combined. At the same time, courts launched a "Sunshine Justice" initiative, which consists of a series of measures to increase the transparency and accessibility of judicial services, including making more court decisions available to the public. However, information concerning corruption-related court activities has become more opaque instead of more transparent. First, after the trial of Bo Xilai, no trials of ranked public officials have been made open to the public in any shape or form. Live streaming of court activities has been made possible for certain

types of cases but never for cases of corruption. Instead, only snippets of video clips or still images taken from the trial will be released through official media, just enough to show the confession of guilt of the accused and the rendering of conviction. The trial of Bo Xilai became the first and the last (semi)-open trial on corruption that an observer can only hope to have. Second, contrary to what the “Sunshine Justice” initiative suggests, judicial activities concerning high-ranking public officials become a blind spot that is exempted from relevant transparency measures and are kept in the shadow despite the high level of public interest involved in these cases. Based on a search at the national court judgements database (<http://wenshu.court.gov.cn>), no court decision of the 65 court trials of corrupt public officials at and above the deputy ministerial rank taken place after 2012[21] has been made available to the public at the time of writing. Third, after 2012, courts have tightened the regulation of lawyers’ activities in and out of courts, barring them from disclosing information of court activities on sensitive cases to the public. This measure has effectively cut off the last remaining however *ad hoc* non-official access to anticorruption information, which was tolerated before the new regulation. Therefore, the transparency of judicial activities regarding individual corruption cases, especially those involving high ranking officials, has clearly reduced compared with the situation before 2012.

Statistics

As mentioned earlier, statistics regarding anticorruption activities can help identify patterns of corrupt conduct, its attributing factors, to assess the effectiveness of anticorruption policies and to evaluate and improve the performance of anticorruption institutions. In China, anticorruption institutions are best positioned to conduct such statistical compilation and analysis since they collect and hold the original data. It is also reasonable to believe that these institutions have the technical capacity to perform these tasks.[22] Currently, statistics on anticorruption activities are released mostly by the CCDI and the Supreme People’s Procuratorates. Even though the scope of such information is disproportionate to the richness of the raw data that these institutions can collect, considerable improvement has been made. For a long time, what we could find in the press release was only the simple aggregation of the cases that had been opened and closed in the previous year and the general historical trend. Since 2012, the CCDI has been releasing notices of anticorruption decisions of individual cases in a much more regular and timely fashion, which has provided a pool of meta-data that can be used by commercial media and researchers for further statistical analysis.[23]

Anticorruption propaganda and disinformation

In contrast to the reticence of anticorruption institutions regarding the disclosure of factual information on anticorruption activities, the propagation of information that is collected and compiled for propagandistic purposes is proactive and its methods have become more refined and sophisticated. In this case, propaganda is defined as “a systematic form of purposeful persuasion that attempts to influence the emotions,

attitudes, opinions, and actions of specified target audiences for ideological, political or commercial purposes through the controlled transmission of one-sided messages (which may or may not be factual) via mass and direct media channels.”[24]

Propagandistic anticorruption information is different from factual anticorruption information in two main aspects. Firstly, anticorruption propaganda is used to influence its readers and audience whilst factual presentation of anticorruption information is to inform. Secondly, propagandistic information is not grounded on facts. Instead, a large portion of its contents consists of a repetition of doctrinal information, personal opinions and expressions of self-reflecting thoughts. Therefore, the costs and efforts required to produce such information is much cheaper compared with the costs of production of news items grounded in fact-finding. Consequently, propagandistic information is produced in much greater volume and disseminated with greater intensity in comparison to factual information.

Corruption-related propagandistic information can be divided into two categories. The first is information compiled by the official anticorruption institutions. Such information includes coverage of anticorruption activities, journalistic-style reports on corruption scandals, anticorruption editorials and other supportive information such as repentant statements provided by corruption offenders. Most of this category of information is created by professional reporters or writers. The second category is comprised of the large volume of fragmented and brief online commentary remarks in support of the official anticorruption policies or decision. Such information is mostly created and disseminated by propagandistic workers recruited by the Party propaganda department and its branches as well as the Communist Youth League, who are nicknamed as “little pink (小粉红)” or “fifty cents party (五毛党)”.[25] Among the two categories of propaganda, the role of the first is primary and will be the focus of the analysis below.

The logic of the propagandistic anticorruption narrative

The main function of corruption-related propaganda is to establish in the mind of its readers a specific narrative of corruption, in other words, why corruption happens, how it happens and what role the Party plays in corruption-related activities. Such narratives are used to isolate the exposed corrupt conduct from the rest of Party affairs and subsequently insulate the Party from the misdeeds of its corrupt members. Typically, these narratives emphasize the ill temperament or moral flaws of the corrupt official, in particular, distancing oneself from the masses, being blinded by the power of public offices, and betrayal of the trust of the Party and the people. For example, in a report tracing the corrupt career of Liu Tie’nan, a senior official at the powerful National Committee of Reform and Development, Liu’s conviction was described as “self-sought shame (咎由自取)” and Liu’s corrupt conduct was ascribed, through the words of an interviewee, as the inevitable result of his ill disposition, to his growing arrogance and dictatorial behavior.[26]

Anticorruption narratives also emphasize the role of certain external factors that compel officials to commit corruption. Such influence comes mainly from two sources: greedy family members of the corrupt official and scheming bribers. For example, the corrupt

conduct of Xi Xiaoming, former vice-president of the Supreme People's Court, is explained as the result of his bad parenting, which, according to the report, had led him to fall victim to the greediness of his son, who was found to have served as the intermediary of most of the corrupt transactions of which Xi was accused.[27] Similarly, former deputy Chairman of the National People's Conference of Political Consultancy and governor of Jiangxi, Su Rong also attributed his crime to bad parenting in his own repentant statement.[28] Apart from family members, bribers are also blamed for the corrupt conduct of officials. For example, in explaining pervasive corruption in Shanxi Province, an anticorruption investigator used the phrase “encircled and ensnared (围猎)” to describe the environment in which officials conducted their business and were “compelled” to take bribes from business-owners. [29] Such narratives highlight the instrumentality of the bribers whose deception is, apparently, so difficult for officials to discern until such corrupt engagement is caught and punished by anticorruption institutions.[30] Furthermore, as far as the narratives go, the vulnerability of these corrupt officials towards greed and temptation is characterized as the outcome of their abandonment of communist ideology, their failure to follow Party instructions and to adhere to Party disciplines. By deserting the communist cause and leadership, as explained in these narratives, these officials strayed from the flock and subsequently fell victim to self-inflicted wrongs, becoming susceptible to the corrupting (external) elements.

Therefore, the explanation of why and how corruption takes place provided by official narratives associates corruption with the dispositional characteristics of individual offenders. They assign the cause of corruption to the corrupt officials themselves or external factors, such as bad influence from their family members and/or scheming bribers. At the same time, this explanation dissociates the parasitic conduct of corrupt officials from their host, the Party. As the narrator stated in a CCDI documentary series *Always on the Road*: “Implementation of rules eventually relies on the [individual] person [in office] ... If everyone strictly complies with the regulations and the rules, then there will be no corruption”.[31] This line of explanation is repeatedly addressed in the remorse statements (忏悔书) of officials convicted for corruption, in which they would claim full responsibility for the crime that they have committed and repent for the damage that they have caused to the Party and the people.[32] Occasionally systemic factors are also mentioned in the propagandistic narratives, for example, when collusive corruption is involved. However, such systemic factors that are now popularly termed as “political ecological environment 政治生态环境” must be presented as a localized issue, i.e. confined within the geographic/sectorial jurisdiction of the officials involved.[33] Once localized, even systemic factors can be isolated from the Party and keep the integrity of the latter intact.

As mentioned above, in anticorruption propaganda the report of corruption scandals always goes hand in hand with the coverage of anticorruption activities. The narratives applied in the reporting of corruption scandals not only dissociate the Party from the corrupt offenders but also portray the Party as a wise victim who is able to discern the betrayal of their trust by the corrupted official. Now enlightened, the Party turns itself from a victim to a crusader and becomes the only force that can be relied upon to right the

wrong. Next, the propaganda narrative focuses on the salvation of the Party, who as the guardian of the interests of the people, is ready to take all actions necessary to fight corruption. Specifically, party-state propaganda will demonstrate anticorruption policy-makers' belief in the value of honesty of public offices and their recognition of the severity of the political and social harm of corruption to public interest. Any suspicion or speculation, if it exists, about ulterior motives behind the anticorruption polices will also be dispelled. Anticorruption propaganda also highlights the urgency of the problem of corruption, famously framed as an issue of the life and death, which justifies the relevant anticorruption policies, measures and practices.

The last strand of the anticorruption propagandistic narrative is to show the robustness of the implementation of anticorruption measures and the efficacy of enforcement by anticorruption institutions. All corruption cases that have been exposed are presented not only as evidence of the misdeeds of individual offenders but also as evidence of the achievement of the Party's anticorruption efforts. These cases exemplify the compelling force of anticorruption polices, the relentlessness of implementation efforts and the potency of the disciplinary capacity of the Party, all of which are proofs of the indispensability of the Party as the most reliable force to fight corruption.

Re-styling anticorruption propaganda

Since 2012, there has been a surge, in terms of volume and intensity, of dissemination of anticorruption propaganda. In early 2014, soon after President Xi Jinping took office, an important institutional change was made to promote the effectiveness of anticorruption propaganda. The CCDI, the most important anticorruption institution in China, set up its own propaganda department. This means that the CCDI is granted the power to disseminate anticorruption information directly to the public, presumably bypassing the censorship examination by the Central Propaganda Department, hence avoiding delay and stalling caused by intricate inter-departmental politics. At the same time, the Party appointed Xiao Pei to head the new CCDI Propaganda Department, an appointee who has had a long track record as an editor-in-chief at both Party and metropolitan newspapers, notably including the Beijing Youth Daily and Beijing Evening Newspaper.[34]

Thus empowered, the CCDI first launched an anticorruption propaganda campaign to “demystify” its anticorruption work,[35] announcing anticorruption policies, decisions, work procedures and regularly and timely updates on the progress of individual case investigations.[36] In September 2013 the CCDI and the MOS jointly opened their stand-alone website www.ccdi.gov.cn. On 1 January, 2015, the CCDI ushered the New Year with a brand-new template on their website, adopting a refreshing sans-serif style. At the same time, the CCDI hired more staff for its propaganda division to ensure that the website's homepage is updated on a daily basis.[37] Six months later, the website launched a platform for the public to report disciplinary violations online. A further six months later, the CCDI/MOS opened their official account on the popular social media platform Wechat and launched a mobile App.

This “demystification initiative” has significantly raised public awareness of the anticorruption activities of the Party. Since its launch the CCDI website has become the most important window to the anticorruption work conducted by the highest anticorruption institution in the country. Having the privilege to be the first to report on anticorruption investigations involving high-ranking public officials, the CCDI website attracted daily traffic of more than 1 million hits and ranked as the most visited official websites of any public institution in 2014.[38]

At present, the website has eight columns: Leaders’ Activities, Party Disciplines and Regulations, Disciplinary Examination, Inspection Work, Open Information, Monitoring and Exposure, Online Interview, Online Exhibition. The website releases a considerable amount of anticorruption-related factual information. It collects, compiles and releases information regarding the latest anticorruption activities of the CCDI and all provincial CDIs. It outlines and provides the full text of important anticorruption regulations. Needless to say, the website is also a propaganda platform, hosting special editions where the profiles of model anticorruption agents are published and the confessions of convicted officials are displayed in multi-media forms.

Perhaps most important of all, the jewel in the crown of anticorruption propaganda work is a two-part documentary-series that the CCDI produced together with the national state television network CCTV in 2016. The first series *Always on the Road* addresses the question of how corruption takes place. The series covers eight slightly different themes in eight episodes. Each episode addresses one anticorruption policy issue, which is exemplified by specific case stories. The entire series covers more than 40 corruption cases, including those of “big tigers”, that is the Party officials of and above the rank of deputy minister. The second series has three episodes, reporting on the internal investigations of corruption committed by anticorruption agents. It addresses the classic question of who monitors the monitors and underlines the political mission and ethical obligations of anticorruption institutions and their agents. Both series were broadcast at primetime on CCTV and are available for streaming on the CCDI website as well as other major commercial video-streaming websites.

In the past, anticorruption propagandistic multimedia materials were old fashioned, adopting a heavy-handed, outmoded propagandistic style that can be traced back to the early time of the PRC. The materials were monotonous and would overwhelm the audience with dry texts of anticorruption policies and propagandistic commentaries delivered by a high-pitched narrator. The interviews were noticeably staged and confessions were unconvincing.

The two latest CCDI documentary-series mark a major contrast to the above. They followed the Western style of “current affairs” broadcast journalism format with a greater sense of journalistic realism. Interviews with corruption offenders and anticorruption agents constitute the backbone of the series, in addition to footages of past and recent activities of Party leaders and interviews of incumbent Party leaders and experts. The series does not have a presenter. The interviewer’s face and voice are also cut from the scenes. Therefore, from the audience’ viewpoint, all stories are told by the corruption offenders themselves and anticorruption agents who are involved in the cases. The scenes

are cut frequently between the shots of street views of the location where the crime took place, the prison where the offenders are kept and the office where the anticorruption agents are interviewed. In between the stories, current practices are related to past practices in the earlier period of the PRC and imperial China, punctuated with ancient anticorruption aphorisms. All these various fragments, including interviews, archival footages, figures and charts, are connected through the voice-over of mature baritone, who provides coherence to the story and elevates its moral significance with important editorial messages. Without conducting a well-designed survey, it is difficult to precisely evaluate the effect of this new-style propaganda on its viewers' perception of corruption and anticorruption activities, but there is no doubt that this new realistic reporting style blurs the line between factual and propagandistic information more than ever.

Disinformation

Disinformation is one of many propagandistic techniques that existed long before the arrival of the "post-truth" era where "fake news" can make a difference.[39] Disinformation works most effectively where access to the source of information is monopolized and strictly controlled by the government. In the context of anticorruption activities in China, disinformation may be used during smear campaigns which usually accompany the fall of corrupt high-ranking officials. Stories produced during such campaigns aim to demoralize and discredit officials, who are prohibited to voice their points of view and to challenge the official narratives themselves or through their attorneys or family members. Such monopolistic control of access to the source of information makes the public more receptive to disinformation produced and circulated by the government.

However, disinformation does not only take place in authoritarian regimes where information is heavily censored. Societies with free access to information are also vulnerable to disinformation. For example, overseas Chinese news outlets are flooded with unexamined accusations against public officials except that their targets are officials who are still in power. These outlets are often hosted by dissidents of the Chinese government, who establish their own broadcasting channels, empowered by the user-generated information-sharing platforms, most notably Youtube. These "self-media" outlets broadcast not only dissenting political opinions but also serve as platforms through which individuals can air news-worthy corruption allegations of Chinese government leaders who are still in power, which is a taboo topic in the media within China.

The story that has received the widest public exposure involved recent allegations made by Guo Wengui, a New York-based business tycoon, who accused several members of the Politburo of the Party of various offenses, including embezzlement, solicitation and taking of bribes. The allegations were broadcast in the form of interviews first through Youtube Channel of Mingjing TV and later Guo Wengui's own Youtube channel and Twitter account. The participation of such "independent" media outlets adds an additional dimension to the corruption-related information landscape. At the same time, in the absence of institutionalized journalistic ethics rules, these "independent" news outlets are easy platforms for disinformation as much as the authorized propaganda platforms.

Consequently, despite that more information is produced, it is however mixed with disinformation that is difficult for average reader/audience to ascertain and hence does not necessarily bring us closer to truth.

Conclusion

In this article, I assessed the quality of transparency of anticorruption activities in China by examining the availability of anticorruption information in the public domain and the quality of the access to such information. Given the role of censorship and propaganda in information dissemination and media practices in China, I made an important distinction between factual information and propaganda and examined both.

In general, the volume of corruption-related information has drastically increased since 2012 thanks to the introduction of various social media platforms and the increased anticorruption efforts. There has been some steady improvement in the release of corruption-related laws and regulations as well as of the announcement of main procedural decisions during the disciplinary and/or judicial processes of individual corruption cases. However, the control over detailed information that may explain how and why a specific decision has been made was significantly tightened. More importantly, recipients of corruption-related information enjoy no autonomy in their choice of the information received because of the limit on the access to the source of information controlled by governmental authorities.

While the provision of factual information remains limited, propagandistic anticorruption information is produced in abundance and circulated to the public with much greater intensity and growing sophistication. In the past five years, great efforts have been made by the Party to improve the popularity of anticorruption propaganda and to increase the diversity of anticorruption propagandistic contents. The purpose of anticorruption propaganda remains the same, which is to localize problems of corruption by characterizing corruption offenders as trust-breaching and venal opportunists who have deserted the cause of the Party and fallen prey to beguiling bribers. Thus, the Party is able to portray itself both as a victim of the crimes of corruption and as a crusader against corruption, while striving to have its moral image repaired and integrity restored.

List of Abbreviations

AEBB	Anti-Embezzlement and Bribery Bureau
CCDI	Central Commission of Discipline and Inspection
CCP	Chinese Communist Party
CPD	Central Propaganda Department
MOI	Ministry of Inspection
NBCP	National Bureau of Corruption Prevention
NSC	National Supervision Commission
WCPB	White-collar Crime Prevention Bureau

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Notes

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[2] Friedl Weiss, Silke Steiner, "Transparency as an element of good governance in the practice of the EU and the WTO: Overview and Comparison," *Fordham International Law Journal*, no. 5 (2007). Michael Johnston, "Good Governance: Rule of Law, Transparency, and Accountability," *New York: United Nations Public Administration Network* (2006).

[3] Ibid.

[4] Dan Dionisie, Francesco Checchi, "Corruption and Anticorruption Agencies in Eastern Europe and the CIS: a Practitioners' Experience," (UNDP Bratislava Regional Centre, 2008). pp.7-15. OECD, "Specialised Anti-corruption Institutions – Review of models," (Anticorruption Division, OECD, 2006). pp.5-8.

[5] For more detailed explanation on the party-state structure, see Ling Li, "'Rule of law' in a Party-state – A conceptual interpretive framework of the constitutional reality of China," *Asian Journal of Law and Society* 2, no. 1 (2015).

[6] For example, to see how the Party can influence judicial decision making in courts, see ———, "The Chinese Communist Party and People's Courts – Judicial Dependence in China," *The American Journal of Comparative Law* 64, no. 1 (2016).

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[8] Propaganda Office CCDI, *A brief course of the institutional development of Discipline Inspection Commissions* (Beijing: China Fang Zheng Press, 2002).p.4.

[9] Ibid. p.5.

[10] Ibid. p.6.

[11] Official website of the Bureau.

<http://politics.people.com.cn/GB/8198/114315/114316/6763150.html>

[12] Annual Report of the Supreme People's Procuratorate of 2003. Information available at <http://news.qq.com/a/20090310/001269.htm>

[13] See <http://news.sohu.com/20161110/n472770223.shtml>

[14] See <http://news.sina.com.cn/o/2017-01-09/doc-ifxzkfuk2920322.shtml>

[15] For an archival record of such instructions, see www.chinadigitaltime.com under the column of the “Ministry of Truth”.

[16] For more details, see Anne-Marie Brady, “Guiding Hand: The Role of the CCP Central Propaganda Department in the Current Era,” *Westminster Papers in Communication and Culture* 3, no. 1 (2006). and David Shambaugh, “China’s Propaganda System: Institutions, Processes and Efficacy,” *The China Journal*, no. 57 (2007).

[17] The exposé on Wen Jiabao’s family members published by the New York Times is one good example.

[18] See <http://china.caixin.com/2014-07-29/100710329.html>

[19] See <http://www.wenxuecity.com/news/2015/04/01/4151073.html>,
<http://www.epochtimes.com/gb/13/10/5/n3979684.htm>

[20] Ling Li, “The “Production” of Corruption in China’s Courts – The politics of judicial decision-making and its consequences in a one-party state,” *Law & Social Inquiry* 37, no. 4 (2012).

[21] Based on the data provided in the report at <http://news.sina.com.cn/c/sz/2015-11-19/doc-ifxkwuwy6977243.shtml>.

[22] See http://www.spp.gov.cn/zdgz/201701/t20170114_178549.shtml.

[23] For example, see the special column on corruption at <http://news.sina.com.cn/z/zgfanfu2012/>.

[24] Richard Alan Nelson, A chronology and glossary of propaganda in the United States, 1996, pp.232-233

[25] For further reading on this topic, see Rongbin Han (2015) Manufacturing consents in Cyberspace: China’s Fifty Cents Army, *Journal of Current Chinese Affairs*, Vol. 44, no. 2, 105-134.

[26] Similar narratives can be found in the reports on the cases of Liu Tie’nan 刘铁男, Deng Qilin 邓麒麟, Tan Qiwei 谭栖伟. See the documentaries series Zhong, J. (2016). Always on the Road 永远在路上 produced by the CCDI and CCTV in 2016.

[27] See <http://china.caixin.com/2017-01-12/101042911.html>.

[28] Zhong, J. (2016). Always on the Road 永远在路上, episode 4.

[29] Zhong, J. (2016). Always on the Road 永远在路上, episode 3 & 4.

[30] Zhong, J. (2016). Always on the Road 永远在路上, episode 5 & 8.

[31] Zhong, J. (2016). Always on the Road 永远在路上, episode 8.

[32] This line of discourse was used by almost every convicted official who was interviewed in the documentary-series.

[33] Zhong, J. (2016). Always on the Road 永远在路上, episode 5 & 8.

[34] Haitao王海涛 Wang, “Why is the Propaganda Work of the CCDI so Brilliant 中纪委的宣传工作怎么这么牛.”

[35] Shu王姝 Wang, “Charting Public Opinion on the Most Discussed Topics in 2014 中纪委官网登“2014网络舆情热点首爆媒体排行榜”,” 新京报网.

[36] Yuliang吴玉良 Wu, “Background, History and Main Functions of the CCDI Organizational Department and Propaganda Department 中央纪委组织部、宣传部的组建背景、历史沿革和主要职能,” *CCDI Press Release* (2015).

[37] Wang, “Charting Public Opinion on the Most Discussed Topics in 2014 中纪委官网登“2014网络舆情热点首爆媒体排行榜””.

[38] Ibid.

[39] Max Holland, “The Propagation and Power of Communist Security Services Dezinformatsiya,” *International Journal of Intelligence and CounterIntelligence* 19, no. 1 (2006). Also see various examples presented in Edward S. Herman, Noam Chomsky, *Manufacturing consent – The political economy of the mass media* (Vintage, 1994).

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