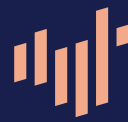


REPORT
NO. 2 2026



SWEDISH NATIONAL
CHINA CENTRE

A close-up, artistic photograph of a newspaper, showing the texture of the paper and the edges of the pages. The newspaper is slightly crumpled and folded, with some text visible on the pages. The lighting is dramatic, highlighting the texture and color of the paper.

Chinese government efforts to influence Swedish media

Erik Mo Welin and Gustav Sundqvist

Summary

- China has increased its efforts to influence foreign journalists and media over the past decade, not least through different forms of repression and various co-optation strategies. This report draws on an online survey and semi-structured interviews to investigate Chinese authoritarian influence attempts on Swedish language media outlets.
- Swedish journalists experience repression in both China and Sweden. One primary method of attempting to control reporting is by restricting access to China. A considerable number of research participants reported additional repressive activities, such as personal criticism from or threats by the Chinese authorities. The Chinese embassy in Sweden has been an active perpetrator of these repressive activities, and was particularly active in the late 2010s and early 2020s. Swedish journalists have also experienced possible attempts at co-optation by the Chinese authorities, such as offers of paid trips to China.
- Despite concerns about self-censorship in the broader community of Swedish language media, few individual journalists reported practicing this themselves. Rather than silencing Swedish journalists, this study suggests that China's influence attempts have stimulated more critical reporting on China. This confirms the findings of previous studies that Chinese media interference is less effective in countries with robust democratic institutions and high levels of press freedom.

Policy recommendations

1. Media organisations should increase international collaboration and share experiences of authoritarian influence attempts to strengthen resilience.
2. Trade organisations in the media should develop clear guidelines for engaging with China and other authoritarian states.
3. Media outlets should develop alternative methods of reporting , such as diaspora collaboration and online investigations, to overcome restrictions on access.
4. Swedish authorities should ensure sustainable funding to protect the independence and capacity of traditional media.

Introduction

China is ranked one of the world's least free countries in terms of press freedom,¹ but its influence on international media is growing.² Under the leadership of President Xi Jinping (习近平), the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) has increased its efforts to boost its “discourse power” (话语权) by gaining more control over narratives about China in other countries, as expressed in the slogan to “tell China’s story well”.³

To control narratives about China abroad, the CCP has also attempted to exert authoritarian influence on journalists and media.⁴ Journalists have long been the targets of transnational repression,⁵ of which China is considered the worst perpetrator globally.⁶ Recent studies have mapped China’s authoritarian influence on media in various countries.⁷ This has involved efforts to intimidate, harass or exert pressure on journalists, editors and commentators over their reporting, sometimes insisting that critical or unfavourable material is withdrawn or removed.⁸ International backsliding on democracy and press freedom has emphasised the importance of deepening knowledge of China’s attempts to influence foreign media.⁹

Sweden is a useful case study for understanding China’s efforts to exert influence. The abduction of Swedish publisher Gui Minhai in 2015 strained bilateral relations with China and led to diplomatic tensions and Chinese sanctions against Sweden.¹⁰ In this context, the Chinese authorities engaged in an aggressive propaganda campaign against Swedish media,¹¹ through which several Swedish journalists were subjected to pressure and targeting.¹² Against this backdrop, this study maps Chinese authoritarian influence attempts on Swedish-language media in the past decade by investigating the experiences, perceptions and reactions of journalists.

Research methods

This study approaches authoritarian influence through the analytical framework of *repression* and *co-optation*, which are two of the most important ways that authoritarian regimes exert influence abroad.¹³ Repression can take violent forms, such as detention or serious threats, or it may take less explicit forms that nonetheless restrict individual (political) freedom, by means such as surveillance or targeted criticism.¹⁴ In this study, co-optation is defined as tying strategically relevant actors to a regime¹⁵ by providing financial support or other benefits.¹⁶ Authoritarian influence can lead to either compliance or defiance,¹⁷ which may take the form of either adapting to or cooperating with the regime or becoming actively more critical of it.

The study departs from previous literature on China’s authoritarian influence on foreign media and China’s global media strategy. We mapped scientific publications, think tank reports and, to a lesser extent, news articles on China’s attempts to influence global media to situate influence efforts in Sweden in a global context.

Two methods were used to investigate experiences of and reactions to Chinese authoritarian influence attempts in Sweden. First, a digital survey was conducted of leading Swedish opinion journalists in the field of international politics and security.¹⁸ In total, 79 opinion journalists were approached, 26 of whom responded (33 percent).¹⁹

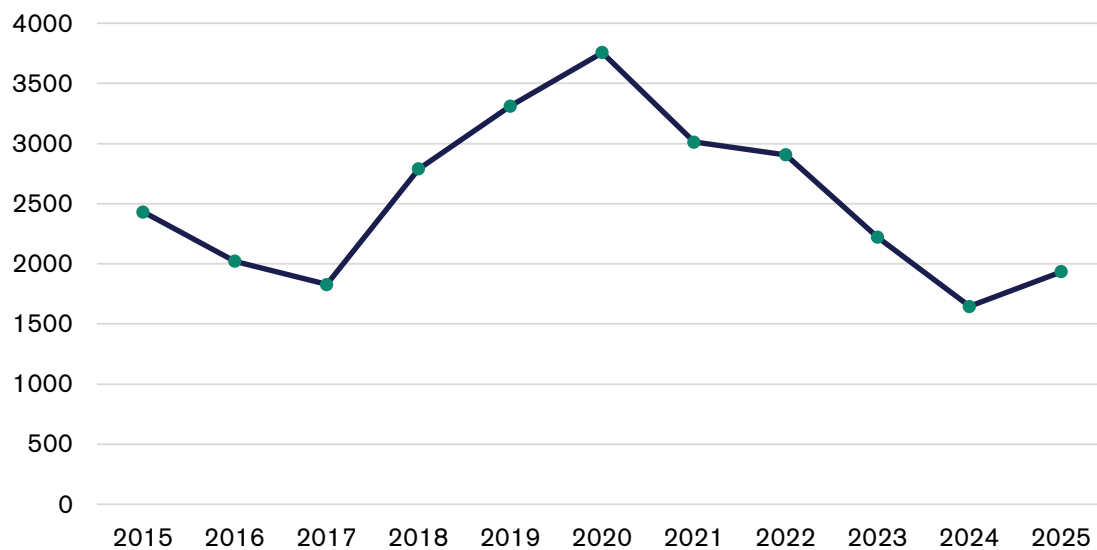
In addition to the online survey, we conducted semi-structured interviews with ten journalists. In a first group were journalists providing news coverage related to China or who had

experience of working as China correspondents for major Swedish media outlets in the past 15 years. A second group comprised opinion journalists who have written about China-related issues.²⁰ A news editor was also interviewed. Our and colleagues' networks were used to compile an initial list of possible interviewees. The snowball-method was then used to identify more potential interviewees.

Coverage of China in the Swedish media

To understand China's attempts to influence Swedish media, a brief sketch of the coverage of China is required. Traditional Swedish-language media platforms cover China in several ways. *Sveriges Television* (SVT) has had correspondents in China since 2005,²¹ while *Swedish Radio* (SR) has had an office with established correspondents since 2006. During the period covered by this study (2015–2025), several of the largest newspapers, such as *Dagens Nyheter* and *Dagens Industri*, have also had correspondents stationed in China. Apart from coverage of China on site through correspondents, issues related to China are also commonly reported on and debated among journalists working on newspapers in all parts of Sweden, including opinion journalists. Figure 1 shows the number of articles about China in a selection of Sweden's most influential newspapers in the period 2015–2025.²²

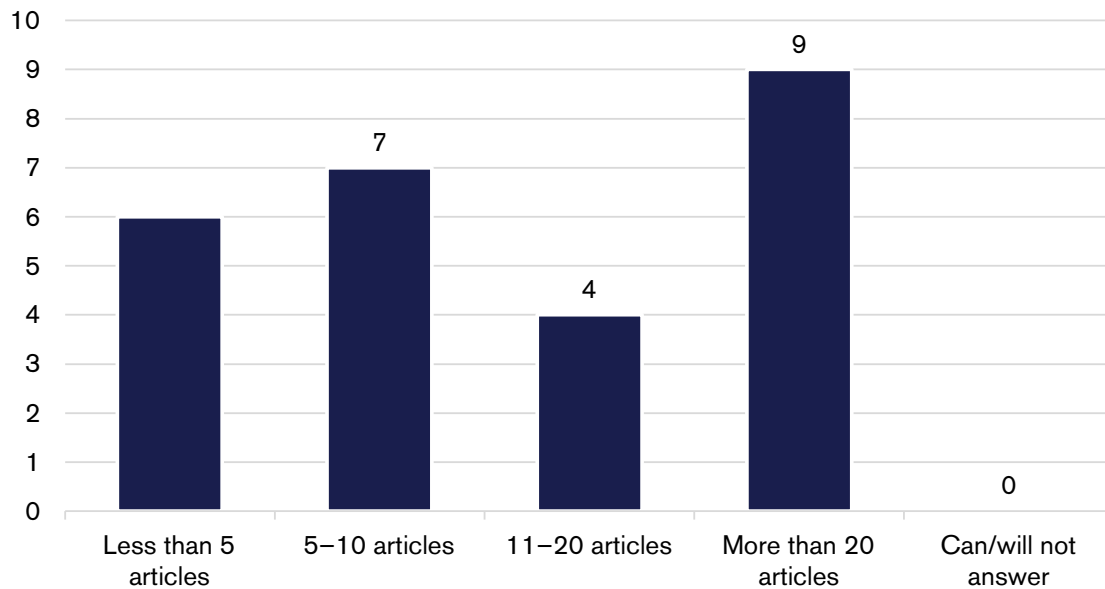
Figure 1. Number of published articles about China in a selection of Sweden's most influential newspapers, 2015–2025



Since the mid-2010s, coverage of China in the Swedish-language media, not least in open editorials, cannot be isolated from the deteriorating relationship between the two countries. Sweden and China experienced worsening relations following the kidnapping of the publisher Gui Minhai in 2015 and further deteriorated in 2019 after the non-governmental organisation, PEN Sweden, gave an award to Gui.²³ During this period, as figure 1 shows, there was a steady increase in the number of articles about China in Swedish media outlets. By around 2021, relations had reached an “an all-time low”²⁴ and Swedish public opinion towards China was among the most negative globally.²⁵ Public opinion has continued to be quite negative towards China but has shown a slight improvement in the past two years.²⁶

The online survey conducted for this study found that the coverage of issues related to China by leading Swedish opinion journalists varies considerably. Figure 2 shows that six survey respondents had published fewer than five articles on China-related issues in the past five-year period, while nine respondents had published more than 20 articles. A large majority of respondents (85 percent) thought that China received too little media attention in Sweden.

Figure 2. Roughly how many opinion pieces on issues related to China have you written over the past five years?



The relationship between media and state in China

To investigate China's global media and authoritarian influence efforts, it is useful to understand the country's control of its domestic media. According to the CCP, the role of the press and news media is generally to "serve as the mouthpiece of the government".²⁷ In the 1990s, partly due to commercialisation, there was some diversification of the Chinese media landscape. This included a limited but significant growth in investigative journalism in the period 1990–2013.²⁸ In contrast, the presidency of Xi Jinping (2012–) has been characterised by tightening control.²⁹ In 2016, Xi declared that the media must bear the CCP as their "surname", underscoring that they are expected to align unequivocally with the Party leadership.³⁰ In 2019, the CCP circulated an internal directive denouncing "western models of journalism".³¹

Today, China's media landscape is one of the world's most controlled. The country ranks 178th of 180 in the World Press Freedom Index, and only Eritrea and North Korea have a worse score.³² The internet is severely regulated, where surveillance and control reach "virtually all digital platforms".³³ As of February 2024, more than 100 000 websites were being blocked in China, including international news outlets such as the *New York Times*, the *Wall Street Journal* and the BBC, as well as independent Chinese language media outlets from Taiwan, Singapore and the United States.³⁴ Repression of individual journalists is also severe. The country is the world's leading jailer of journalists. Over 100 are currently in prison.³⁵

Methods of controlling foreign media in China

The Chinese government maintains strict control over foreign media in China. A study by the Foreign Correspondents Club of China (FCCC) found that almost all (99 percent) of the respondents thought that reporting conditions in the country did not meet international standards.³⁶ To operate in the country, a foreign news organisation must first be granted approval from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. In addition, each individual journalist must be granted a journalist visa to work in China.³⁷ It is generally difficult for foreign news outlets to gain access to China by securing the necessary permits. Visa approvals for journalists are often delayed, sometimes for several years.³⁸ According to the report by FCCC, nearly one-third of respondents (32 percent) reported that their bureau was understaffed due to difficulties in bringing the necessary number of reporters to China.³⁹ News bureaus often employ local staff for assistance. These local staff are legally forbidden to engage in any reporting but operate in a “grey area” that can include interviewing, sourcing, translating and sometimes even writing drafts.⁴⁰

The Swedish journalists who were interviewed for this study confirmed that the visa process was an important control mechanism. One noted that foreign outlets were dependent on visa approval, and that managing the relationship with the Chinese authorities was an inevitable part of the process: “We are dependent on getting that visa. That does not mean you are prepared to abstain from doing a certain type of journalism. But you need to be willing to meet and be polite or else you won't get that visa. That's a fact”.

Another interviewee said that the visa process was used strategically by the Chinese authorities with the intention to “domesticise both the foreign media organisation and the individual journalist” and could be regarded as “repression mechanism number one” to keep foreign media outlets and journalists in check. The interviewee noted that this strategy had been consistent throughout the Hu Jintao (胡锦涛) and Xi Jinping period. Recently, however, some minor but significant changes have been made, such as reducing visa validity from five years to one year and delaying the granting of visas until the last minute. On one occasion, an interviewee was granted a visa on the same day as their departure flight.

Foreign journalists operating in China are also common targets of other forms of repression. Most journalists in the study conducted by the FCCC believed that they were the targets of surveillance through Wechat, phones or listening devices in their offices or homes.⁴¹ Several interviewees in the present study noted that it was common practice for local cadres to be informed as soon as journalists registered at a hotel. As one interviewee described it: “As soon as you checked into a hotel, a signal was sent to local officials who turned up. It might happen that you were then called to meet with them”. Another common practice is to be subjected to interrogations by the Chinese authorities, often referred to as being “invited to tea”.⁴² One interviewee recalled a particularly threatening situation when they were invited to drink tea with the central security service in Beijing:

I mean, of course it's uncomfortable – being taken down one or two flights of stairs and then sitting in a windowless room with, maybe, an estimated ten people. Of course that's an intimidating situation. Some brought their diplomatic representatives. I met a French journalist on his way out, and he had someone from the embassy with him. I didn't bother with that, because I knew – what were they going to do, really?

In addition, foreign journalists are often subjected to other forms of repression. Interference and obstruction of reporting is particularly common.⁴³ One of the interviewed journalists noted that this was a common strategy and that journalists had to be prepared to deal with such obstruction:

A very important method is on-the-ground control – sending officials after you. They disrupt your interviews and follow you around; all day if necessary, all week if necessary. So, in practice, you only have a few hours to work once you arrive somewhere. And you also can't stay overnight in the place where you're doing interviews – not until you've secured your material and made sure that anything sensitive is out of there.

Harassment and threats against foreign journalists are not uncommon, as well as verbal attacks on social media.⁴⁴ One interviewed journalist had been detained for a short period. Another common concern among journalists working in China is putting either their sources or their Chinese colleagues at risk. The FCCC has reported an increase in incidents of intimidation against Chinese employees at foreign news bureaus in recent years.⁴⁵ Interviewees for this study expressed similar concerns. One journalist admitted that they might abstain from publishing material in instances where sources in China were at risk of repression, such as the threat of imprisonment. The interviewee confirmed that risks to local partners and journalists have increased under Xi Jinping and that they therefore no longer cooperate with local journalists.

Attempts at co-optation were also reported: at least one interviewee had been offered money or gifts while working in China. The respondent noted that although they had never accepted such offers, it was quite common for journalists – both Chinese and foreign – to be offered bribes in the form of “red envelopes” (红包): “They tried to bribe journalists....It was more of a corrupt praxis at the time, journalists receiving money”. The phenomenon of so-called red envelope journalism is a documented problem in China's domestic media.⁴⁶ However, less is known about the extent to which foreign journalists are the targets of such bribes.

China's methods for influencing media abroad

The CCP has also been increasing its efforts to influence international media content and narratives about China in recent decades. Since the early 2000s, the CCP has launched an increasingly ambitious media campaign worldwide in multiple languages, investing billions of dollars in the process.⁴⁷ During Xi Jinping's time in power, the CCP has introduced the concept of “discourse power” (话语权), emphasising its efforts to gain more control over narratives about China in other countries – an ambition most clearly expressed through the slogan to “tell China's story well”.⁴⁸

The CCP's efforts to increase its influence abroad take many forms, but include propaganda and authoritarian influence efforts. First and foremost, these attempts have taken the form of establishing media outlets abroad. China has boosted its global media presence in the recent decades through the expansion of various global media outlets, such as CGTN, China Radio International (CRI), Xinhua and the English language edition of *China Daily*.⁴⁹

Such outlets have been active in spreading Chinese state-sponsored narratives through “content sharing agreements” with major news outlets and platforms, a strategy that the Chinese regime refers to as “borrowing a boat to go out to the Ocean” (借船出海).⁵⁰ Such agreements often offer free content and constitute “the most significant avenue through

which Chinese state media reach large local audiences".⁵¹ A recent study on Chinese influence on global media found that more than one-third of the study's respondents said that such content-sharing agreements with Chinese outlets existed in their countries.⁵² The state news agency, Xinhua, has been particularly active in spreading its stories to news agencies abroad, reaching a large international audience.⁵³

The CCP uses diaspora media to shape political narratives abroad, and Beijing exerts strong control over the information accessed by Chinese-speaking communities worldwide. One study found that, in 21 out of 30 countries, media outlets owned by the Chinese state or aligned with Beijing were highly influential in shaping the news available to Chinese speakers, particularly through the widely used social platform WeChat.⁵⁴ In Australia, Chinese state influence has "drastically transformed the Chinese language media environment, curtailing negative coverage of China in much of the local Chinese language media and stripping out any independent reporting".⁵⁵ An earlier Swedish study demonstrated similar Chinese links to the CCP in four major Chinese language outlets. All these outlets were found to be generally politically aligned with the CPP.⁵⁶

The Chinese state also asserts influence on foreign media through repression and coercive tactics. One study detected an increased occurrence of such tactics in the period 2019–2021 in 24 out of the 30 countries studied, often taking the form of intimidation of reporters, cyberbullying and cyberattacks. One common form is intimidation of journalists by Chinese embassies or other Chinese authorities abroad, a form of intimidation that occurred in half the countries.⁵⁷ Despite the lack of more comprehensive studies documenting the extent to which China has been engaging in such tactics in recent years, a recent investigation by the International Consortium of Journalists (ICIJ) and Citizen Lab found clear indications of an ongoing "wide ranging campaign" to threaten, coerce and intimidate critics overseas, including journalists.⁵⁸

The Chinese authorities also use sponsored trips and training events for foreign journalists to influence narratives about China. These vary from shorter, week-long stays to ten-month training programmes.⁵⁹ A study by *The International Federation of Journalists*, which investigated the experiences of journalists from 58 countries, found that half the respondents could confirm that journalists from their country had been on sponsored trips or exchanges to China. Another study published by *Freedom House* in 2022 found that trips had been sponsored for journalists in multiple countries, from Israel to Brazil and India.⁶⁰ In 2019, a study by *Reporters Without Borders* found that 3 400 journalists from 146 countries had participated in some form of training or exchange programme in China.⁶¹

Such trips and training programmes are often initiated by the *All China Journalists Association* (ACJA), which is a state-run body rather than an independent trade union.⁶² While these trips and training programmes could at least in part be regarded as similar to the soft power strategies used by states such as the United States, they often contain explicit instructions on how journalist should report on China,⁶³ and are often attempts to co-opt journalists in a push for the dissemination of narratives approved by Beijing. There are also examples of trips arranged by non-state actors with close ties to the Chinese state. In Australia, for example, trips for journalists have been arranged by the *Australia-China Relations Institute*, a research institute at the University of Technology partly funded by Chinese state firms such as the Bank of China and the China Construction Bank. According to critics, these trips led to a substantial number of articles about China that lacked sufficient critical nuance.⁶⁴ The ACRI later detached itself from its founder, Huang Xiangmo, and became more critical of China.⁶⁵

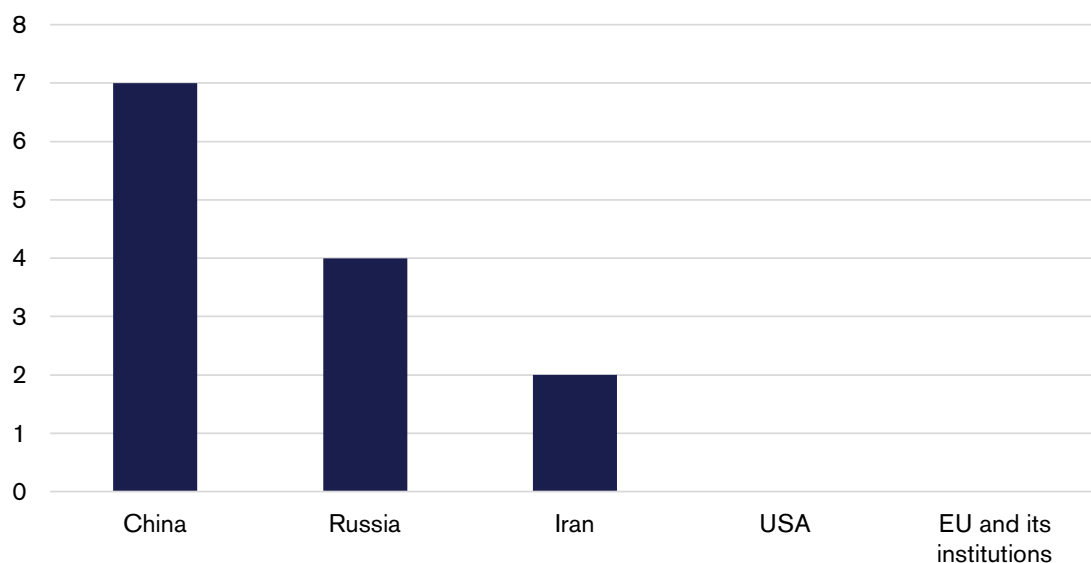
Chinese-sponsored exchange trips and training programmes for journalists often target developing countries with less efficient or democratic systems of governance.⁶⁶ These influence attempts sometimes also target a specific political orientation. For instance, left wing publications were especially targeted in one Latin American country.⁶⁷ In a context of Chinese assertions that journalists globally are shaped by western journalistic values, these initiatives seek to promote not only positive narratives about China, but also an alternative normative framework for journalism, positioned in contrast to the liberal “fourth estate” tradition in which the media is supposed to monitor government and hold authority accountable.⁶⁸ Instead, China attempts to spread what Beijing calls “constructive journalism”, which aims to promote development and positive bilateral relations and to further Beijing’s foreign policy objectives, reshaping how foreign media organisations understand their fundamental role and obligations.⁶⁹

In addition to paid trips and journalistic exchanges, established reporters have been enticed by competitive salaries and the opportunity to present their country’s stories to a global audience – offers that may be particularly appealing at a time when many news organisations face shrinking budgets.⁷⁰

China’s authoritarian influence on Swedish-language media in Sweden

The study’s research participants reported a high level of authoritarian influence attempts conducted by Chinese state actors against journalists and media outlets in Sweden in the past decade. Seven survey respondents reported that they had experienced attempts at undue influence that they suspected were connected to such actors (from bribes to threats or harassment). To assess the level of authoritarian influence from China, the survey asked comparative questions about Iran, Russia, the USA and the EU. Figure 3 shows that more survey respondents reported such experiences in relation to China than in relation to Russia or Iran.

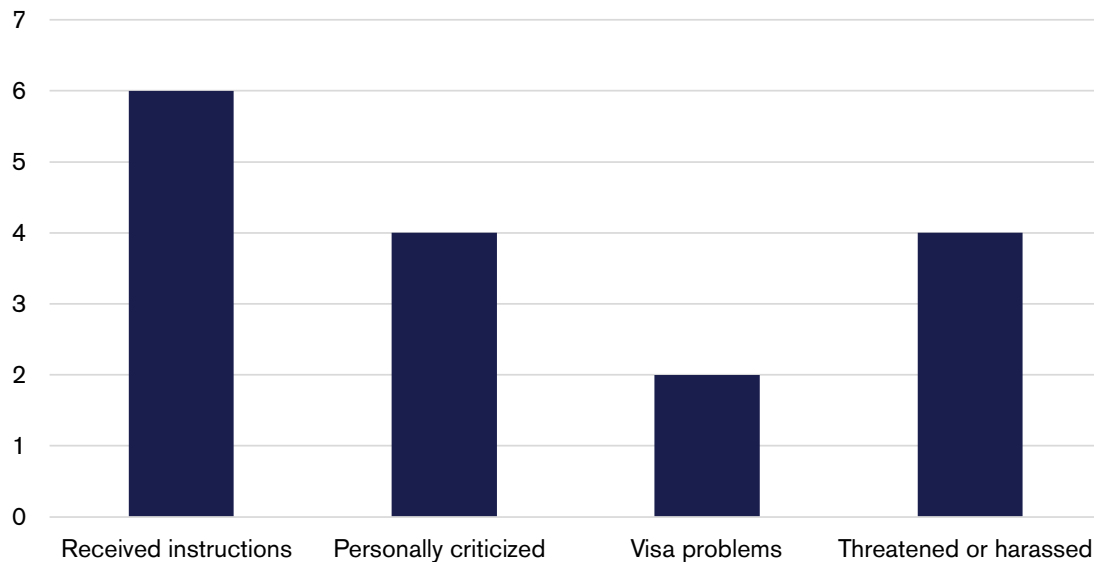
Figure 3. Have you ever experienced attempts at undue influence, such as bribery, threats or harassment, that you suspect were linked to any of the following political actors?



Repression

Figure 4 shows that opinion journalists participating in the study reported experiencing different forms of repression or coercive tactics. Six survey respondents reported having received instructions from the Chinese authorities on how they should report on political issues. Four had been personally criticised by the authorities for what they had written, two had experienced difficulties obtaining a visa to China and four had been threatened or harassed by individuals they believed to be connected to the Chinese authorities.

Figure 4. Have you experienced any of the following in your role as an opinion journalist?



Note: For a more detailed description of the survey questions and their corresponding alternatives, see the appendix.

It was also common for the interviewed news and opinion journalists to have been targeted by repression or coercive strategies by the Chinese authorities. Instructions on how to report on political issues related to China, personal criticism from the Chinese authorities or attacks by the Chinese authorities were particularly common. Several interviewees had received emails from the Chinese embassy that contained statements or phrases that could be interpreted as threats. Such emails, one of the interviewees noted, were perceived as more threatening than being targeted by the Chinese embassy's webpage. As the interviewee described it: "If you really mean [to threaten someone], then maybe you don't do it openly. Instead, you probably do it in a way where no one else hears, I think. That's usually how they do it". The statements, the same interviewee pointed out, seldom constitute explicit threats but instead usually take the form of euphemistic or indirect expressions intended to intimidate while remaining below the threshold of legal liability. Examples of such phrasing from the interviewed journalists included "We reserve the right to take further action on these lies" or "Those who throw dirt on to others often wind up dirtying themselves". Another email contained the phrase that the Chinese authorities would take "all necessary measures" to prevent a certain journalist from publishing.

One interviewee and their media outlet had received a letter from the embassy with the heading: "This is how Swedish journalists are punished by China", criticising publication and accusing the outlet of "media tyranny", a narrative that was established in statements from

the Chinese embassy during the more aggressive campaign against the Swedish media at the end of the 2010s.⁷¹ The interviewed journalist noted that they were “surprised” by the level of aggression:

We are used to being attacked constantly. Even from embassies, actually, that have opinions about our coverage. But this level of aggression was a bit unusual; and also that it was a country like China. It's a bit different with a less powerful country. You know that Hungary, for example, is very active in its media contacts. There are a few other embassies that are also quite proactive. But that China suddenly, out of nowhere, starts writing that we are engaging in media tyranny and that they represent 1.3 billion Chinese people. This was a level of argument that surprised us.

Another interviewee received a call from the Chinese embassy threatening damage to bilateral relations unless the media outlet apologised, a call that the individual described as: “Very threatening. Very aggressive. I have never had a call from someone who screamed so much”. The call also included threats that the media outlet at which the interviewed journalist worked would never receive a visa to work in China again unless it apologised. Another interviewee not only received personal threats from the embassy, but also had several of their editors contacted with instructions that they should stop working with them. The interviewee felt that this was a strategy by the embassy to stop the interviewee from working as a journalist. The same interviewee had also received threatening personal letters from the Chinese authorities to their mailbox. While criticism from other states was not unusual, China was mentioned by several interviewees as being more active and aggressive.

Some of the interviewees highlighted the bad relations between Sweden and China following the Gui Minhai abduction as a factor in shaping the repression of Swedish journalists: “I came to the conclusion that there was something causing a bit of a hitch in the relationship between China and Sweden during this period, and journalism became a sort of...playing field that people used to make their points in various ways”. Threats from the Chinese authorities were often framed in terms of claims that the journalist in question was responsible for damaging bilateral relations between Sweden and China, something that the interviewees also reflected on:

The narrative is basically that it's your responsibility not to sabotage relations between Sweden and China. So you have to stop writing. That's the narrative being pushed here. In a brutally personal way. There's an asymmetry here when you have a nuclear power – a gigantic economy like China – that goes after a single individual in our open, free democracy in this way.

In addition to receiving threats from the Chinese embassy or its representatives, interviewees reported other forms of repressive practices. One had received suspicious calls from China, which they regarded as “spooky”, and been the target of suspected cyberintrusion on their computer. Although there was no evidence that these intrusions were connected to the Chinese authorities, the incidents coincided with the journalist visiting a major event that the Chinese ambassador, Gui Congyou, had also attended. Another interviewee had experienced suspected attempts at cyberattacks or phishing, as well as suspicious contacts on social media platforms. These attempts often occurred in relation to the journalists' publications, which made them suspect that they were organised by the Chinese authorities with the intention of influencing reporting on China. Another interviewed journalist had received multiple emails from “friends of China” sharing their views on reporting, which the interviewee suspected had been coordinated by the embassy.

Despite multiple examples of repression, the interviewees pointed out that the Chinese authorities seldom used serious violence against foreign journalists. One interviewee perceived Russia as more likely to engage in violent repression: “China won’t be the first party to escalate into a physical conflict. It will be Russia”.

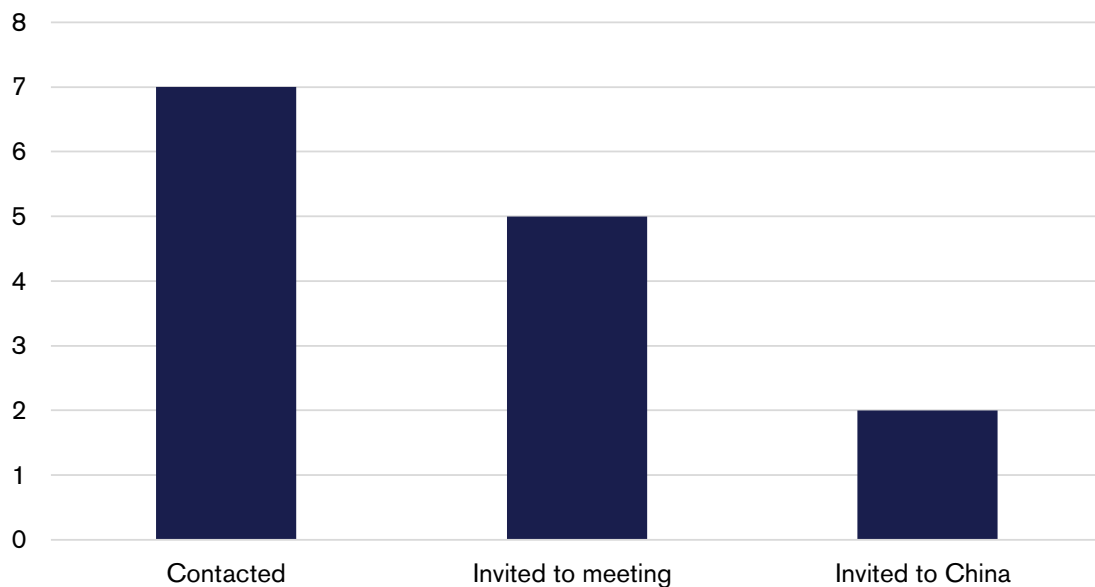
Many of the interviewed journalists pointed out that the Chinese authorities’ criticism had softened and the repressive tactics decreased after the end of ambassador Gui Congyou’s tenure (2017–2021). This indicates that China is currently less actively engaged in this form of repression against journalists in Sweden. Nonetheless, two interviewees had been personally criticised by the Chinese embassy since 2021, including receiving personal criticism in emails. One had also been targeted by cyberattacks suspected to be connected to China.

Attempts at co-optation

Figure 5 shows that some survey respondents had been contacted in their role as journalists by what they believed to be Chinese state actors. These contact attempts can be legitimate but can also represent attempts at co-optation. Seven respondents had been contacted by Chinese state actors, five had been invited to meetings and two had been invited to China.

There were few examples among the interviewed journalists of direct experience of

Figure 5. Have you experienced any of the following in your role as an opinion journalist?



Note: See the appendix for a more detailed description of the survey questions and their corresponding alternatives

suspected co-optation. One interviewee noted that it was becoming more difficult to draw the line between an influencer and a journalist, and that it was common for influencers who were positive about China to be invited on paid trips to China, particularly to Xinjiang. One journalist had been personally invited by the Chinese embassy to a press trip to China, which the interviewee declined:

Well I thought it was strange. When I saw the invitation I interpreted it as “Welcome to North Korea, we are here to show you what we have on offer”. It was some kind of round trip with meetings. It felt very staged and that was the last thing I would go on. So I declined more or less immediately.

It is important to point out that not just China, but also other states, including democratic ones, engage in activities that can be perceived as co-optation. One interviewee had been approached by Taiwanese representatives and invited to Taiwan multiple times. The interviewee, however, had never accepted a paid trip to Taiwan.

In sum, there were a few instances of suspected attempts at co-optation by the Chinese authorities among the survey respondents and interviewees. In addition to the results of the online survey and the interviews, it has been confirmed elsewhere that personnel from at least two Swedish alternative news media platforms have been on paid trips to China.⁷² This could indicate that China's attempts at co-optation target journalists outside of the Swedish mainstream media.

Self-censorship

As noted above, reactions to attempts at authoritarian influence vary between self-censorship and defiance. Reported self-censorship due to fear of sanctions from Chinese state actors was not particularly common among the survey respondents. Only one person agreed that they sometimes avoided criticising or writing negatively about China to avoid sanctions, while another avoided doing so on rare occasions; 24 respondents (92 percent) stated that they had never had refrained from criticising or writing negatively about China to avoid sanctions. At the same time, Figure 6 shows that several survey respondents believed that other opinion journalists self-censor or refrain from writing negatively about China to avoid sanctions by the Chinese authorities. Two survey respondents think this occurs to a very high degree, three think it occurs to a relatively high degree and ten think it occurs to a relatively low degree. According to one survey respondent: “I think Swedish journalists avoid writing critically about China. They rarely do so when it comes to major investments, and these days almost never when it comes to the regime's brutality”.

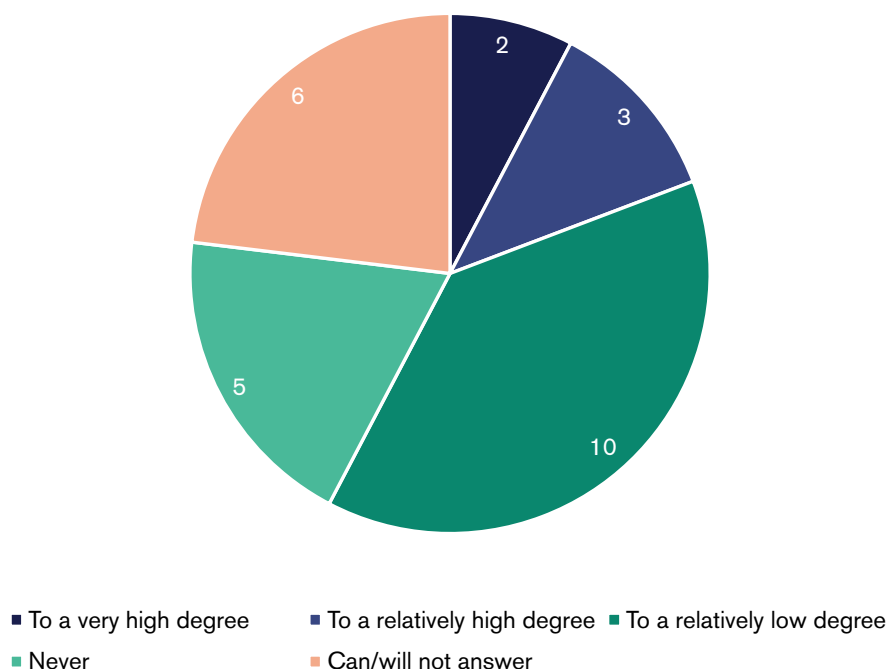
In line with the survey results, most of the interviewees did not believe themselves to be practicing self-censorship, even if they stated that other journalists do. One interviewee said that some journalists might practice self-censorship to maintain access to China: “I often get questions from such colleagues asking: ‘can I write this?’ , ‘can I do this?’ Imposing self-censorship on themselves. They try to second-guess what China and the party state wants”. Another interviewee thought that China was more successful than it might seem in inducing self-censorship:

They succeed to a greater extent than one might think. As early as 2015–2016, I heard from a journalist working at one of Sweden's largest media outlets that they avoided reporting on sensitive issues while covering the 2008 Beijing Olympics because they did not want to run into visa problems in the future. So this was already in 2008, before the threats became real.

Nonetheless, despite concerns about self-censorship among journalists in general, none of the interviewed journalists reported having abstained from writing about a particular topic out of fear of repression by the Chinese authorities. Several interviewees emphasised that the role of the journalist and the journalistic credo were incompatible with self-censorship:

I think that if I'm going to be a journalist, I have to write what I believe to be the truth. Otherwise, there's no point in me being a journalist. Many journalists practice self-censorship; but they often end up doing a pretty poor job.

Figure 6. To what extent do you think opinion journalists censor themselves or refrain from writing negatively about China in order to avoid sanctions from Chinese authorities?



Another interviewee emphasised that self-censorship and journalism are mutually exclusive, and that even “minor” practices of self-censorship can quickly escalate and cause the journalist to self-censor more, which would negatively impact their reporting:

But my reasoning is this: if you're going to work as a journalist and write about China—especially if you're going to do investigative journalism—you can't say, “I'm not going to write about this. It's too sensitive” because that quickly becomes a slippery slope where it's impossible to do any reasonable reporting at all. So, it was a conscious choice not to censor myself.

Concerns about safety with regard to travelling to China

Almost all the interviewees reported that they were concerned about travelling to China. One interviewee, for example, said that they no longer travelled to China, including Hong Kong, having received threats from the Chinese embassy. Another said that they were concerned about travelling there, since they would not “want it to be a one-way ticket”. One of the interviewees expressed concerns about going to China as a tourist but could still imagine going there as an accredited journalist:

As things stand now, I would not want to go back there as a tourist. Not even as a real tourist. If I were to go there, it would be as an accredited journalist. Because I think that role would offer some protection... You have to consider the risk of being used as a pawn. You could get arrested and be accused of something that you haven't done. I think the risk of that happening is considerably lower if you have been reviewed and approved beforehand.

Several interviewees were concerned about the safety of their colleagues who were on site in China. One interviewee had been particularly concerned when they and their media outlet were sending reporters to cover the Beijing Winter Olympics in 2022 during the covid pandemic:

As a journalist and an employer at the time, I felt that this worried me. That there might be certain factors at play and that they wanted to retaliate against public opinion surrounding Gui Minhai.

In addition, interviewees revealed concerns about family members in Sweden in case something happened to them in China. One interviewee mentioned that a close relative no longer dared travel to China because of their relationship to the interviewee.

Defiance and critical reporting on China

Rather than successfully controlling or silencing Swedish journalists, the present study indicates that China's authoritarian influence attempts have induced more defiance than compliance and even more critical coverage of China in the Swedish media. A previous study counted 52 articles reacting to the Chinese authorities' campaign against the Swedish media between January 2018 and February 2019.⁷³ One interviewee confirmed that after China had engaged in repressive activities against Swedish journalists during this period, which coincided Gui Congyou's tenure, journalists who had not previously covered China began to write about the country from perspectives such as freedom of expression and democracy. As the interviewee put it: "You upset the entire media in Sweden. That's what you did. You got an enormous amount of negative publicity. It kind of woke things up....It was like a wake-up call for the entire Swedish media". Another interviewee said that they personally felt emotionally triggered to write more about China: "And of course it's a bit exciting as well, to suddenly have China as an enemy. Exciting as a journalist".

While looking for explanations for this response in the form of the more critical reporting on China, another interviewee highlighted Sweden's long tradition of press freedom as an explanation for what the journalist perceived as the resilience of Swedish media against China's authoritarian influence attempts:

We in Sweden...well, we have a Freedom of the Press Act from 1766 that's quite robust and effective, so I don't think China will be able to silence us that much....I mean, China has only succeeded in one thing: they've managed to silence perhaps some Swedish academics, but not journalists.

Other studies have identified the limited efficiency of China's attempts at authoritarian influence in the media and information sphere in many countries, often stimulating more defiance and critical coverage of China.⁷⁴ In particular, "countries with a strong tradition of press freedom, and with networks of organizations dedicated to upholding its principles, tend to mount a more robust response to Chinese government influence efforts".⁷⁵ The Swedish case provides further evidence that China's aggressive diplomacy and repressive activities against journalists and media outlets have so far had a limited effect on countries with more robust democracy and freedom of expression.

In the light of the increase in critical reporting, a concern raised by some research participants was that journalists might refrain from writing positively about China from fear of being criticised or publicly shamed in the Swedish debate. Two survey respondents reported that

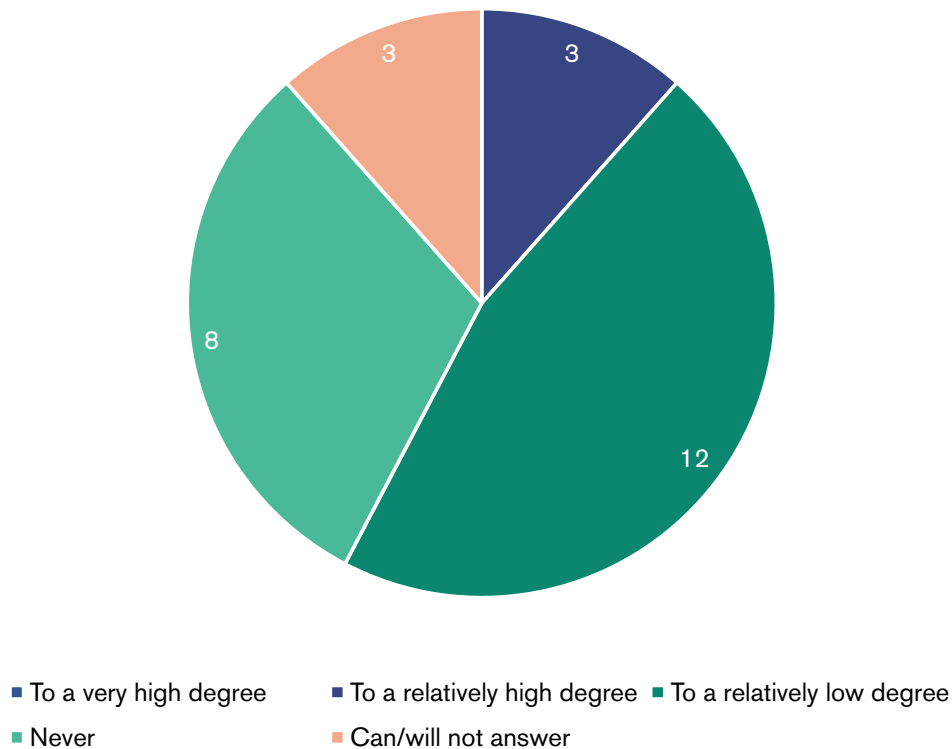
on rare occasions they have avoided writing positively about or advocating cooperation with China for this reason, although 24 (92 percent) said that they had never done this. Three survey respondents (see Figure 7) believed that other opinion journalists to a relatively high extent refrain from writing positively about China to avoid being criticised and/or cast in a negative light in the Swedish public debate.

In an open-ended response, one survey respondent wrote about what they perceived as a “window of acceptable opinion” in the debate on China, which sets the limits for both China doves and China hawks:

There is definitely a narrow window of acceptable opinion when it comes to writing about China in Sweden. On the one hand, you risk being singled out by the Chinese embassy; on the other, you risk being attacked by people critical of China (ranging from Falun Gong to the Free Tibet movement and opinion formers on X).

One interviewed journalist stressed that China’s authoritarian influence attempts risk making reporting too one-sided by stimulating more critical voices and silencing more nuanced ones, particularly since China restricts access to reporting inside China.

Figure 7. To what extent do you think opinion journalists censor themselves and refrain from writing positively about China in order to avoid criticism and/or suspicion in the Swedish debate?



Conclusions

This report has demonstrated that Swedish journalists experience repression in both China and Sweden. In line with their international colleagues, Swedish journalists experience a high degree of authoritarian influence efforts when reporting from China. Journalists and media outlets are particularly dependent on maintaining access to China and are concerned for both their own personal safety and the safety of their staff and sources in China.

Journalists have also been targets of repression by the Chinese authorities in Sweden. Several research participants reported having been the target of different forms of undue influence, including receiving instructions from the Chinese authorities on how to report on China-related issues, or being personally criticised, threatened or harassed by people they believe to have connections to Chinese state actors. The Chinese embassy has also put pressure on several media outlets in Sweden. For instance, one interviewee reported that the embassy had pressured multiple media platforms and their editors to cease cooperation with a specific journalist. One interviewee had received a call from the Chinese embassy accusing the journalist of damaging bilateral relations and threatening to revoke access to China unless their media outlet apologised. According to the interviewees, the incidence of these kinds of repressive activities has reduced but they have not completely ceased since a high-intensity period around the turn of the 2020s.

Previous studies have revealed that Chinese state actors engage in what might be regarded as co-optation strategies, most notably in the form of paid press trips to China and training for journalists. Two Swedish alternative media outlets were recently invited on sponsored trips to China. The study confirms that Swedish journalists have experienced what could be regarded as attempts at co-optation by Chinese state actors in the form of offers of trips to China.

This study also reveals that China's interference has not succeeded in silencing Swedish journalists, while also providing new data on the experiences of journalists in an online survey and interviews with individual journalists. Although some were concerned about self-censorship in the broader community of Swedish-language media, individual journalists in both the online survey and the semi-structured interviews reported low levels of self-censorship. Several participants pointed out that self-censorship was incompatible with the role of the journalist, and that the aim of the journalist must always be to write the truth. Although self-assessed levels of self-censorship should be interpreted with caution, the results of the online survey and interviews nonetheless suggest that China's repressive tactics have not been successful in the Swedish context.

This study therefore indicates that China's authoritarian influence attempts have had only a limited effect – or even backfired – in Sweden. Rather than silencing Swedish journalists, China's attempts have stimulated more critical reporting by people initially not particularly interested in Chinese affairs. One participant even described China's attempts at authoritarian influence as a wake-up call for the Swedish media. This confirms the findings of previous studies on Chinese authoritarian influence on media and journalists abroad. China has had some success in controlling and shaping journalists' reporting in some developing countries, and studies also indicate success in controlling Chinese language media in many countries.⁷⁶ Nonetheless, its repression and co-optation strategies towards journalists working in other languages have had less success in other parts of the world, particularly in the democracies of Europe, North America and Australasia.⁷⁷ Civil society and independent journalist

networks have often played a substantial role in pushback against Chinese interference, which indicates that societies with stronger traditions of press freedom and more robust democratic systems might demonstrate more resilience to China's influence attempts than countries with more repressive governments.

Despite the resilience of the Swedish traditional media landscape, it is important to highlight that Sweden and comparable countries are not immune to Chinese authoritarian influence in the media sphere. Recent developments and studies indicate that China's media strategy is moving away from attempting to shape narratives in traditional media and towards influencing social media content creators and influencers. In Sweden, the Chinese embassy has also published multiple editorials on far-right alternative news media platforms.⁷⁸ There is evidence that several well-known Swedish influencers have been on trips to China sponsored by the Chinese authorities.⁷⁹ More studies are needed of China's activities in these alternative spaces in order to fully assess China's authoritarian influence and Sweden's democratic resilience to such attempts.

Policy implications

This study demonstrates that China has engaged in authoritarian influence attempts against journalists writing in Swedish. The study also indicates that China's aggressive strategies for controlling and repressing Swedish media outlets have not been successful and have even stimulated more critical reporting on China. However, we cannot rule out that the media in Sweden and similar liberal democracies will become more vulnerable to authoritarian influence attempts in the future. To mitigate this risk, we make the following policy recommendations:

- Strengthen international collaboration to better address authoritarian influence by non-democratic states in the media landscape. Swedish journalists and trade organisations should deepen international collaboration and share experience of the Swedish case with international colleagues to improve understanding of China's authoritarian strategies and increase democratic resilience.
- Trade organisations in the media sector should create and further develop guidelines and/or codes of conduct on engagement with China and other authoritarian states to reduce vulnerability to authoritarian influence.
- One of the most common and effective ways in which the CCP controls foreign media reporting on China is by restricting access to the country. To ensure that limited access does not lead to a substantial decline in the quality of in-depth reporting, media outlets in Sweden should explore alternative ways of reporting on China, such as cooperation with colleagues in the Chinese diaspora and developing methods of investigative online journalism, such as open-source intelligence gathering (OSINT).
- Traditional media outlets face significant financial pressures. Digital revenues are not sufficient to make up for revenue loss due to the decline in print and a decline in funding for public service media in many countries.⁸⁰ At the same time, the Chinese state has invested significant resources in strategically shaping global media narratives. Sweden and similar liberal democracies should ensure sufficient public funding to sustain the operation and independence of traditional media.



Erik Mo Welin

Erik Mo Welin is an analyst at the Swedish National China Centre



Gustav Sundqvist

Gustav Sundqvist is an analyst at the Swedish National China Centre

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About the Swedish National China Centre

The Swedish National China Centre was established in 2021 as an independent unit at the Swedish Institute of International Affairs (UI). The Centre conducts policy-relevant research and aims to contribute to a long-term improvement in the state of China-related knowledge in Sweden. UI's publications undergo internal quality control. Any views expressed are those of the authors.

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19 Although a 33 percent response rate is reasonable for a survey of this kind, the limited number of respondents means that some findings should be interpreted with caution. Of the survey respondents, 18 (69 percent) identified as men and six (23 percent) as women, while two preferred not to answer. In the sample population, 55 opinion journalists (70 percent) had names generally perceived as masculine, while 24 (30 percent) had names generally perceived as feminine. Eight survey respondents (31 percent) identified as ideologically left wing, while 13 (50 percent) identified as ideologically right wing. Four placed themselves in the ideological middle and one preferred not to answer. In the sample population, 29 (37 percent) worked at socialist or social democratic media platforms, while 44 (56 percent) worked at liberal or conservative platforms. Thus, with respect to gender and political orientation, the respondents appear to be reasonably representative of the target population.

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