China’s Information Management in the Sino-Vietnamese Confrontation: Caution and Sophistication in the Internet Era

By Andrew Chubb

After the worst anti-China violence for 15 years took place in Vietnam this month, it took China’s propaganda authorities nearly two days to work out how the story should be handled publicly. However, this was not a simple information blackout. The 48-hour gap between the start of the riots and their eventual presentation to the country’s mass audiences exemplified some of the Chinese Communist Party’s (CCP) sophisticated techniques for managing information during fast-breaking foreign affairs incidents in the Internet era. Far from seizing on incidents at sea to demonstrate China’s strength to a domestic audience, the official line played down China’s assertive actions in the South China Sea and emphasized Vietnamese efforts to stop the riots, effectively de-coupling the violence from the issue that sparked them. This indicated that, rather than trying to appease popular nationalism, China’s leaders were in fact reluctant to appear aggressive in front of their own people.

By framing the issue in this way, China’s media authorities cultivated a measured “rational patriotism” in support of the country’s territorial claims. In contrast to the 2012 Sino-Japanese confrontation over the Diaoyu Islands, when Beijing appears to have encouraged nationalist outrage to increase its leverage in the dispute, during the recent incident the Party-state was determined to limit popular participation in the issue, thus maximizing its ability to control the escalation of the situation, a cornerstone of the high-level policy of “unifying” the defense of its maritime claims with the maintenance of regional stability (Shijie Zhishi [World Affairs], 2011).

Crisis and Bloodshed

The crisis began on May 2, when China positioned a massive oil drilling platform in disputed waters 220km from the Vietnamese coast, in the South China Sea. Dramatic on-water confrontations ensued, with numerous collisions and water cannon battles resulting in damage to vessels and injuries to personnel (Xinhua, May 11; Tuoi Tre, May 12). This was the clearest example of unilateral escalation by China in years, but the CCP made no attempt to use this aggressive maritime behaviour to impress its domestic mass audience. On May 7, as the clashes raged on the water, an order from propaganda authorities instructed online media to rigorously find and delete reports on Sino-Vietnamese collisions and “immediately report on work progress” (China Digital Times, May 7). Two days later, when PRC media finally began reporting the issue, coverage was dominated by Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) official Yi Xianliang’s remark that China was “stunned” to have had its ships rammed 171 times during “completely normal” operations (Beijing Evening News, May 9). Since then, officials have repeatedly emphasized that such operations have been carried out in the area for more than 10 years (Beijing Times, Xinhua, May 9; MFA, May 12; Xinhua, May 16). Rather than making an unprecedented move to assert its claims in the area, China was simply the innocent victim of Vietnamese aggression.

Many in Vietnam saw things differently, and protests against China’s action took place in cities around Vietnam on the weekend of May 10–11 (Tuoi Tre, May 11). International media observed that the Vietnamese government appeared at least tacitly to approve of the protests (AP, Christian Science Monitor, May 10; Guardian, May 11; Economist, May 17). The weekend’s demonstrations had been largely peaceful, but reports of rioting involving thousands of workers in factory areas began to appear in English-language media on the evening of Tuesday, March 13. Vietnamese media reported that “as of 3 am on Wednesday, 460 companies [had been] infiltrated by vandals” (Hong Kong Standard, May 14; Tuoi Tre, May 16; Thanh Nien, May 14). In the worst incident, a mob numbering around 1,000 attacked a Taiwan-owned steel mill that was being constructed by PRC state-owned enterprise China Metallurgical Group Corporation. According to a statement from the company, four Chinese workers were killed and 153 injured, 23 seriously (CMGC, May 20). Yet until late on May 15 the major Chinese media said almost nothing about these dramatic and terrible events. With such a volatile mix of territorial disputes, maritime clashes, riots and bloodshed, how did the CCP manage to keep control?
Channelling a Media Wave

As overseas media reports of the violence in Vietnam emerged, an order was issued to China’s online media to not report the issue, republish foreign coverage or allow discussion in online forums (China Digital Times, May 14). Although some mention of the attacks was permitted on Sina Weibo, users who tried to share foreign news reports on the events in Vietnam had their posts censored. Deleted Weibo posts included many bitter complaints about the lack of information from China’s major media, with CCTV, Xinhua and Phoenix TV specifically singled out as having gone missing. One user drily suggested the national broadcaster may have “gone to America to report a hurricane, or Africa to film the animal migrations.” Another deleted post summarized this sentiment: “The whole world knows, only China doesn’t know!” (FreeWeibo, May 14–15; Tea Leaf Nation, ChinaFile, May 20).

However, this was no simple information blackout. Instead, the CCP allowed information to flow to where it was most needed, at the same time smoothing the natural spike in public attention and holding back media coverage until an official line could be decided. First, despite the major state media’s silence and Weibo users’ acute sense of information deprivation, there was basic information available to those with sufficient need or desire to search for it. For example, on the morning of March 14, a safety warning from the PRC Embassy in Hanoi on Wednesday morning announced that riots targeting “Chinese-invested businesses” had taken place. This story was reposted at least 80 times on major Chinese news sites, according to Baidu News Search (iFeng, May 14). However, consistent with the order to websites not to republish overseas coverage, a detailed iFeng story compiled from Taiwanese media reports was quickly deleted (iFeng, Archive.org, March 14).

Allowing this basic information to circulate online required further management in order to avoid triggering a spike in public attention that the CCP was not yet ready to lead and shape. Short of banning all reports outright, Party authorities often order online news outlets to simply relegate the issue in question to low-traffic subsections of their sites, or to keep it out of the leading headlines at the top of the page (Author interviews with news supervisors at leading Chinese commercial news portals, Beijing, October–November 2012). Users can still access the information, but only if they actively search for it. Thus, snapshots of iFeng, one of China’s leading news portals, show no mention of the Vietnamese violence on its front page through May 14, while coverage of the issue on May 15 remained tucked away in the Hong Kong and Macao section, as well as the Taiwan section, about half way down the page (iFeng, May 14; iFeng, May 15). Similar patterns were observed on China’s other major commercial news portals, as well as Huaxia Shibao’s influential website. Together with rigorous censorship of Sina Weibo and other “interactive platforms,” this subtle guidance successfully minimized the spread of public attention beyond those who were already following the issue, while allowing access for those sufficiently motivated to search for relevant information.

By the morning of May 15, more than 24 hours after the riots had become a top story in international media, China’s authorities began to ease the information faucet open, at least in certain sectors of the media. The print edition of Huaxia Shibao carried a major back-page story titled “Vietnam claims to have arrested 500 ‘extreme elements,’” and this headline also appeared prominently on the paper’s front page (Huaxia Shibao, May 15). Yet this report, easily the most detailed description of the violence published by the Chinese media to that point, was kept off the Internet until late in the afternoon, and few if any other Chinese newspapers made prominent reports on the topic (ABBao.cn, May 15).[4] This suggests that the CCP’s information control strategists may consider the estimated 2-3 million left-wing intellectuals and nationalist-leaning citizens who buy Huaxia Shibao in print as a trustworthy audience rather than a source of unwanted pressure, a threat to social stability or a reflection of broader public opinion, as some influential observers have suggested. [5] In any case, in the headlines of the major online, print and television news outlets, the issue remained conspicuously absent until the CCP was finally ready with its own, carefully-calibrated version of events.

Media Release

If there were any doubts that China’s ruling party had been holding back a wave of media interest in the violence in Vietnam, they were dispelled on the evening of May 15, when major commercial news outlets including Baidu,
NetEase, Tencent and Sohu and iFeng all suddenly placed it in their top headlines, and many also pushed the story out as a notification on users’ mobile phones (iFeng, May 15; see also author’s Twitter feed). Crucially, while giving the green light to prominent coverage of the topic, the CCP also instructed online media to use only official agency copy or information from the Foreign Ministry’s website (China Digital Times, May 15). [6] Restricting reporting to official sources gave the CCP the best chance to ensure its own messages could frame the events for the domestic audience at large.

The official line in this case appears to have involved at least two important elements: downplaying the role of the PRC’s own assertive maritime actions in precipitating the violence, and limiting domestic anger by carefully attenuating its public accusations against the Vietnamese side, and publicizing the actions the Vietnamese leaders were taking to rectify the situation. China Central Television (CCTV) finally informed a national television audience about the events in its 10pm Evening News bulletin on May 15. Rather mischievously introduced as “information just to hand,” the CCTV report characterized the events as “serious violent incidents of beating, smashing, looting and burning against foreign investors and businesses” (CCTV, March 15, emphasis added). The report, which was in fact a verbatim readout of a statement on the MFA website, also outlined:

- Foreign Minister Wang Yi’s “strong condemnation and stern protest” in a telephone conversation with his Vietnamese counterpart;
- Wang’s statement of the Vietnamese government’s “unshirkable responsibility” for attacks against Chinese businesses and personnel;
- China’s demand for immediate measures to ensure the lives and property of Chinese people in Vietnam, punishment of the perpetrators and compensation for China’s losses;
- Vietnamese Foreign Minister Pham Binh Minh’s assurance that more than 1,000 suspects had been detained, strong measures taken to protect Chinese property and personnel, and that the situation was “trending towards stability”;

Neither CCTV nor any of China's official news agencies’ other reports mentioned the events leading up to the Vietnamese anger: China’s positioning of an oil drilling platform in disputed waters. [7] Viewed casually through the Mainland’s mass media, it was as though the violence in Vietnam had come out of nowhere, rather than being the culmination of several days of maritime clashes and anti-China demonstrations. The widespread promotion the following day of Chairman Xi Jinping’s remark that “invasion is not in the blood of the Chinese nation” may have been another sign that authorities were minimizing the possibility of everyday Chinese people viewing the CCP’s actions in the Paracels as aggressive (China Daily, May 16).

The second prominent feature of official reporting on the violence was the emphasis on the substantive measures Vietnam was taking to curb the violence. One of Xinhua’s first reports on the events noted that Vietnam’s Prime Minister Nguyen Tan Dung had issued emergency orders to the country’s public security apparatus to “take active and tough measures” to guarantee the security of foreign investors and their property, a point also highlighted in provincial television reports (Xinhua, iFeng, May 15; Dongfang Weishi [Dragon Television], Sina, May 15).

In contrast, a Huanguo Shibao story about Prime Minister Nguyen sending mass text messages encouraging Vietnamese citizens to patriotic action was taken down from a range of state news websites (see the story at NetEase, May 17). Other prominent state media reports emphasized the hundreds of arrests made by Vietnamese authorities, as did the above-mentioned CCTV/MFA announcement (Huanqiu Wang, May 15; China Daily Online, May 15; Xinhua International, May 15).

China also carefully attenuated its accusations of Vietnamese government complicity in the anti-China violence. MFA spokeswoman Hua Chunying stated in a press conference that the violence was “directly related to the Vietnamese government’s indulgence and connivance toward domestic anti-China forces and criminals.” However, when the Ministry finally released the official transcript—some hours later than usual—this had been
changed to the milder “unshirkable responsibility” used in the CCTV report (Bloomberg, May 15; MFA, May 15). Thus, when the CCP finally decided to legitimate discussion of the issue, it also appears to have been careful to avoid provoking a strong anti-Vietnamese response from its own public. If reports of almost no protesters showing up for scheduled anti-Vietnam rallies in Kunming are any indication, these measures were largely successful (East by Southeast, May 19).

Conclusion

The CCP’s management of domestic discourse regarding the anti-Chinese violence in Vietnam was, above all, cautious. Even though the issue concerned the lives and property of Chinese citizens, it was able to keep the issue out of the headlines, off the Internet’s agenda, and away from the Chinese public at large for almost 48 hours, while still allowing relevant information to flow to those who needed or demanded it. When the CCP did decide to inform the public, it ensured the media narratives guiding popular interpretations of what had taken place avoided two extremes: linking China’s own foreign policy actions causally with the Vietnamese violence, and provoking an overly fierce domestic Chinese reaction. This reflects what one commercial online news supervisor has described to the author as a consistent two-track approach to guiding coverage of China’s territorial disputes in recent years: no questioning of China’s actions or positions, and no “irrational” patriotism (Author interview, October 2012).

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Notes


3. Brief reports of the Taiwan Affairs Office’s spokesman condemning “illegal violence” in Vietnam were also reposted at least 40 times (NetEase, May 14).

4. Even the paper’s own Huanqiu news website, which usually posts shortened online versions of the print version’s leading stories before the paper hits the newsstands, held back until after 5pm. (Huanqiu Wang, May 15). Posting leading content online early in the morning appears to be a commercial tactic designed at least in part to stimulate sales of the print paper, with the truncated online versions carrying a notice that reads, “For more detailed content please see today’s Huanqiu Shibao” (Huanqiu Wang, May 16).

5. For a salient example, see Susan Shirk, Fragile Superpower, pp.100-103. Another example of exclusive content being channeled to nationalistic and militaristic constituencies was the PLA Daily’s “Military Newspaper Journalist” (Junbao Jizhe) Weibo account, which released an exclamation-mark laden commentary opining that “Vietnam’s anti-China-ism will continue to lurch forward”, and calling for the “beheading” of the perpetrators (Duowei, May 15).

6. This technique reflects a similar line of thinking to the “White List” mode observed on China’s online media including Baidu and Sina Weibo, wherein searches for sensitive topics display what appears to be a range of results, but
which are all from a select group of “white-listed” state-run websites (Fei Chang Dao, April 20; Fei Chang Dao, December 21, 2012).

7. Three reports that did mention both the events in the Paracels and the violence in Vietnam were: a May 16 Beijing News wrap-up on the violence, the final section of which mentioned Foreign Minister Wang Yi’s conversation with Indonesian Foreign Minister over the Paracels incidents (reposted 80+ times according to Baidu News Search); the Huanqiu Shibao’s May 16 editorial, which mentioned the harassment of the HYSY-981 operation as a further example of Vietnamese aggression (reposted 47+ times, including by Xinhua); and a CNS report on PLA Chief of General Staff Fang Fenghui justifying the Paracels drilling operation in comments made in Washington, which also mentioned violence in the second paragraph.

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