

When the Algorithm Becomes the Narrator: Platform Distribution Logic and the Transformation of China's Strategic Communication

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China's "telling Chinese stories well" initiative, launched in 2013, represents one of the most ambitious state-directed international communication efforts in recent decades. Yet despite the scale of this effort, a persistent gap remains between what China intends to communicate internationally and what actually reaches foreign audiences. This paper argues that understanding this gap requires looking beyond content production — at the distribution infrastructure through which Chinese narratives must travel.

The central problem is this: the initiative was designed around a human-centred logic, where intentional narrators produce deliberate messages for imagined audiences. But the platforms through which these narratives now circulate — YouTube, TikTok, Instagram — operate according to a fundamentally different logic. Their recommendation algorithms do not ask "what does this narrator want to say?" They ask "what will make this user stay?"

To analyse this mismatch, the paper draws on two bodies of scholarship. Strategic narrative theory (Miskimmon, O'Loughlin and Roselle, 2013) helps explain the content dimension — how states construct and project international narratives. Algorithmic governance research (Srivastava, 2023) helps explain the distribution dimension — how platform algorithms constitute a form of political power that reshapes what narratives reach which audiences. Neither framework alone is sufficient; the paper brings them together through the concept of Algorithm Narrative.

This concept captures three specific transformations that occur when state-directed communication enters algorithmically governed platforms. First, the algorithm becomes a co-author: it determines which elements of China's communication are amplified or suppressed, independent of strategic intent. Second, the intended audience is reconstructed: instead of reaching a coherent imagined public, narratives are delivered to algorithmically defined micro-audiences based on engagement prediction. Third, accountability becomes diffuse: when a narrative produces unintended effects, responsibility is scattered across the state, the platform, and the algorithm — because the two operate on structurally incompatible interests.

This third point deserves particular attention. The problem is not simply that algorithms are imperfect or biased. It is that the state's goal — projecting a sympathetic national image — and the platform's goal — maximising user engagement — are structurally misaligned. A video about China that generates outrage performs well by platform metrics while failing completely by strategic communication metrics. Neither party has done anything "wrong." The result is ethically ungovernable under existing frameworks (UNESCO, 2021).

The paper concludes that "telling Chinese stories well" faces a challenge it was not designed to address: not how to tell better stories, but how to navigate a distribution environment where the logic of storytelling and the logic of distribution are fundamentally at odds.

Источники и литература

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