

The foreigners in China's disinformation drive

bbc.com/news/world-asia-china-57780023

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BBC News

Published

🕒 5 days ago



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Foreign video bloggers denouncing what they say is negative coverage of China on highly controversial subjects such as Xinjiang are attracting large numbers of subscribers on platforms like YouTube.

In recent years, the "vloggers" have been increasingly presenting themselves as China-lovers, spreading Communist Party disinformation.

YouTube labels Chinese state media like broadcaster CGTN as government-funded. But there is little policing when it comes to individuals promoting similar narratives.

Some vloggers are suspected of co-operating with state-owned outlets to spread China's rhetoric to the world. But it's far from clear what really motivates them, or how effective this strategy is.

Who are the vloggers?

Co-ordinated videos have recently been appearing on foreign vloggers' channels to counter investigative reports from independent media on the treatment of China's Uyghur community in its north-west Xinjiang region.

There are well-documented allegations of systematic human rights abuses on a huge scale in the region.

The vloggers include British expatriates Barrie Jones, Jason Lightfoot and father-and-son team Lee and Oli Barrett, who use their platforms to comment on the West's alleged "lies" and China's government policies.

They have subsequently gone on to appear in videos for Chinese state broadcaster CGTN.

Earlier videos on their personal channels focus on navigating daily life within China. More recent videos, however, have become overtly political; they staunchly defend China's rhetoric on topics ranging from Covid-19, to Hong Kong and Xinjiang.

Many of these YouTubers have hundreds of thousands of subscribers, and their videos are fiercely promoted and commented on by nationalist users.

'Never been paid to go on a trip'

Vlogging is popular in China, but Chinese video platforms have strict terms and conditions, restricting what users can post. Thousands of internet moderators also screen content.

Consequently, many Chinese vloggers end up posting material filmed from within their homes.

China's 1982 constitution guarantees freedom of speech and freedom of the press. However, Chinese vloggers and citizen journalists are often detained or arrested for making videos deemed to be unfavourable by the authorities. In December 2020, citizen journalist Zhang Zhan was jailed for four years after making a number of vlogs during Wuhan's coronavirus outbreak.

Expat vloggers like the Barretts and Jason Lightfoot, however, appear to be in a comparatively privileged position with significant access, and in some cases facilitated by local officials or state media in China.



image copyrightCGTN

image captionLee Barrett has been listed as a stringer on CGTN's website in recent Xinjiang videos

The Barretts have attended multiple government-sponsored events.

In one of his videos, Lee Barrett comments that organisations like state-owned China Radio International will "offer to pay for the transport, the flights [and] accommodation" in exchange for him and his son commenting on their trip in state media.

In an email to the BBC, the Barretts strenuously denied they post disinformation on behalf of the Chinese government or being paid for content.

Lee Barrett has been listed as a "global stringer" on CGTN's website in recent videos on Xinjiang - that is, somebody who reports for the broadcaster, but is not a staff employee.

Jason Lightfoot is also on its list of stringers. The station billed him as a vlogger critical of "distorted reports" by Western media outlets.

Mr Lightfoot recently appeared in a number of CGTN videos alongside multiple staff reporters on a visit to Hainan.

CGTN says in one such video that Mr Lightfoot "is grateful to CGTN for giving him the experience to explore Hainan" and that CGTN staff and expat vloggers "enjoyed working together, producing livestreams and videos as a team".



image copyrightCGTB

image captionCGTN presents Mr Lightfoot as a vlogger critical of 'Western media outlets' distorted reports'

Mr Lightfoot did not respond to the BBC's request for an interview. However, in one of his videos he says he is "not funded by anyone but myself" and has "never been paid to go on a trip".

Although YouTube does not label any of these pro-China vloggers as being funded or supported by the Chinese government, some videos on their personal channels are subsequently uploaded to and endorsed by government media accounts.

A video featuring Barrie Jones was not only uploaded to CGTN's YouTube account, it was used by China's foreign ministry in a daily government press briefing.

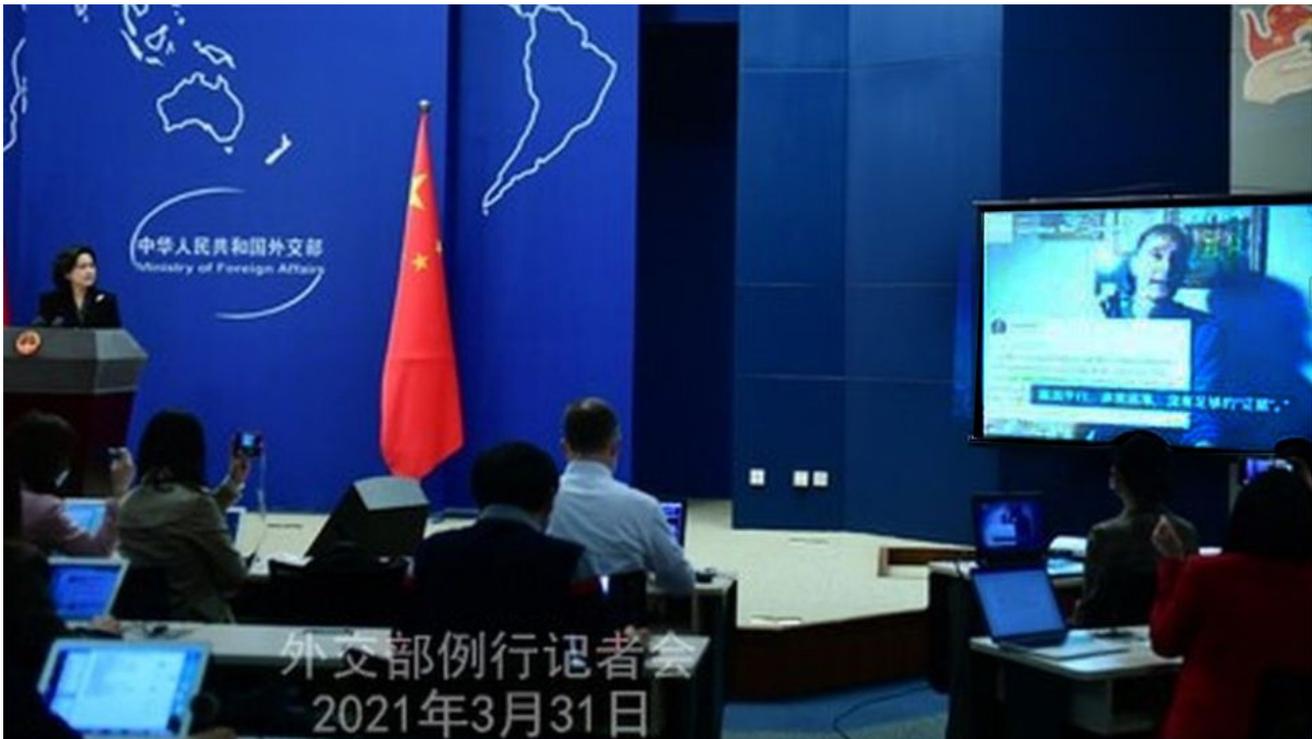


image copyright Ministry of Foreign Affairs

image caption Barrie Jones' video criticising the West for coverage of Xinjiang was shown in a government briefing

In the video - titled "How do some Western media twist facts about Xinjiang?" - Mr Jones claims to have "worked for a newspaper in England... Britain's largest daily circulation newspaper for six years". Some state media publications have referred to Mr Jones as a former British journalist, yet the BBC found no evidence to support this, and his channel is peppered with grammatical and punctuation errors.

When asked about his journalism experience, Mr Jones told the BBC "where and when" he worked as a journalist "is not your concern".

He stood by his claim to have worked for a newspaper but declined to give any further information. He also denied being "paid, prompted, or coerced in any way".

It's unclear why China's foreign ministry presented him as a credible voice at its news conference.

Mr Jones, who also regularly promotes conspiracy theories, denied that his videos had become more political and described claims that he is part of a disinformation campaign as "laughable".

"Neither China nor the Chinese government pay me to do what I do. The truth is, if they offered I would accept!"

China's 'fightback' against foreign reporting

There appears to be a growing network of foreigners being pulled into Chinese state media campaigns.

CGTN says on its website that it currently has more than 700 "global stringers" worldwide, who it offers "international visibility" and "bonuses".

It aims to expand its influencer pool further by offering cash rewards of up to \$10,000 (about £7,190) to reporters, podcasters, presenters and influencers who join its newly-launched "media challengers" campaign. Jason Lightfoot, and Lee and Oli Barrett have appeared in promotional material for this campaign.

CGTN did not respond when the BBC approached it for comment for this article.

But multiple sources at CGTN who spoke to the BBC on the condition of anonymity said there is now a focus within the organisation to make use of "internet celebrities and influencers" for what has been described as a "fightback" against foreign media reporting.

This has included setting up a new "internet celebrities" department whose team "contact foreigners to either use their videos or to co-operate to make videos together", the BBC was told. More recently, some departments have been instructed to "find foreigners to send to Xinjiang to represent us".

Israeli vlogger Raz Gal-Or has posted videos of his recent trips to the region. Mr Gal-Or claims he was invited into people's homes and farms in Xinjiang and says in a video he was able to interview "random Xinjiang locals". However it appears he was accompanied on his trip by a film crew from CGTN, who later shared footage of his video on their YouTube channel.

This experience contrasts with the surveillance, harassment and obstruction faced by the BBC and other media when attempting to report freely in Xinjiang.

Mr Gal-Or did not respond to the BBC's request for an interview.

'It's almost always the Xinjiang content'

All of the named vloggers, who are able to monetise their videos, have quickly racked up tens of thousands of views on their channels, as well as hundreds of comments from highly-active, nationalist commenters, despite YouTube being officially blocked in China.

Australian cybersecurity researcher Robert Potter from Internet 2.0 says that although some videos attract genuine views and support, there is evidence that fake bot accounts are fiercely promoting others.

"There are a few things that YouTube does to stop someone repeatedly opening a video and playing it a thousand times," he explains. "Because it's money to them, if it's a monetised video."

Of the Barretts' YouTube page, he says: "You can see a lot of nationalist boards reposting [videos] and a mix of fake news sites boosting their content."

"This is 'bot fraud', where [users] stick a video on a fake news website and click through that instead of clicking replay on the YouTube video. They try and spoof YouTube into treating it like a legitimate view."

He observed similar activity on Barrie Jones' videos. "There are a number of fake news pages with links to his videos on Xinjiang."

"As for the comments on his videos, a large number of the users joined YouTube very recently. You can see the same people commenting again and again with obviously fraudulent accounts all created around the same time."

What type of content are these users targeting?

"The video that blows up is the Xinjiang video. It's almost always the Xinjiang content," Mr Potter said.

Traditionally, such commenters have been known as China's "50 cent army", because of reports they are paid small amounts of money to post pro-government messages.

This "keyboard army" has long been active, and an influx of messages on foreigners' videos has aroused suspicions that they are circumventing the Chinese firewall to inflate these vloggers' presence, and manipulate commentary on their pages.

The scale of China's 50 Cent operation is such that such videos could in theory rack up thousands of views organically. However, China has a recent history of co-ordinated media campaigns.

During the 2019 Hong Kong protests, and YouTube said they witnessed a co-ordinated attempt by the Chinese government to spread disinformation on their channels.

Google said attempts were made to "disguise the origin of these accounts", and platforms took swift action to remove them.

News website Sixth Tone also noted in May how "click farms" increasingly operate on Chinese social media to boost local influencers' presence.

In 2020, China's advertising association banned companies from using click farms for commercial gains. But operations to inflate propaganda are permissible.

'Anti-China biased BBC'

It's unclear what drives the foreign vloggers - whether they believe in China's messaging or are motivated by the lure of local fame and fortune instead.

The BBC put this question to Lee Barrett and Barrie Jones and asked why their videos had become more patriotic, but we received evasive responses. The Barretts posted on Twitter when approached for this article, describing it as a "hit piece" by the "anti-China biased BBC".

The motivation for China's government media working with the expat vloggers, however, seems clear enough at a time when there is growing international criticism of China for its treatment of Uyghur Muslims and on other issues.

Broadcaster CGTN is seeking to counter criticism - like its Russian counterpart RT - by finding foreign faces who can help sell government messaging overseas, and keyboard armies that help promote them.

YouTube already labels these media platforms as state-affiliated.

A spokesperson for YouTube said its labelling on government videos is "intended to help better equip viewers with information to make decisions about their news consumption". It said that all videos uploaded to YouTube must comply with its community guidelines, and it reviews flagged videos on a case-by-case basis.

YouTube said that the videos sent to it by the BBC did not violate its guidelines.

However, many users will find it hard to spot that vloggers are attached to state-affiliated outlets when platforms like YouTube do not also label these individuals as being linked to the state.