[NL] New research investigates the impact of Chinese interference and intimidation on the Dutch media landscape

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On 30 October 2024, researchers from Leiden University published a report entitled "Chinese Influence and Interference in the Dutch Media Landscape". The report was completed at the request of the *Tweede Kamer* (the lower chamber of the Dutch Parliament) in April 2023 on behalf of the China Knowledge Network (CKN), funded by the Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs. The motion was filed by Ruben Brekelmans, who currently serves as the Dutch Minister of Defence, after Marije Vlaskamp, a journalist at the Dutch newspaper Volkskrant, reported threats in connection with her critical stance on China. The authors Susanne Kamerling and Ardi Bouwers, affiliated with the LeidenAsiaCentre (LAC), determined that China is using a wide range of tactics, from spreading propaganda to intimidating journalists and engaging in cyber infiltration both in and outside the Netherlands. The researchers also found that reporters are not properly equipped to resist these diverse influence operations. As a result, these operations have a "chilling effect" on critical voices about China and its politics.

The report addresses three main issues. First, it explores the working conditions of Dutch correspondents in China by conducting a survey and interviews with correspondents, journalists and Dutch support staff. The researchers described a high level of social or psychological insecurity. Over 42% of the respondents indicated that they often felt unsafe in China and more than half admitted to having faced attempts at influence. China’s influencing or interfering practices were found to affect journalists' work and private decisions.

The report then investigates undesirable Chinese influence and interference in Dutch-language media. It discusses the Marije Vlaskamp case and maps other known instances of intimidation of journalists from Western media. However, it notes that it is often difficult to determine whether the provocations are carried out by official Chinese authorities, criminal groups, or citizens with nationalist views. Even though China’s influence operations on Dutch soil remain subtle, editorial boards remain ill-equipped to properly recognise and address them due to their limited knowledge about China in general.

Finally, the report puts a spotlight on undesirable Chinese influence in Chinese-language and diaspora media in the Netherlands by drawing on interviews as well

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as the available research on the matter. The researchers discovered that most Chinese migrants living in the Netherlands are cautious about expressing their views on sensitive political issues and avoid critiquing Chinese politics even without explicit coercion from the Chinese Government. The report also emphasises transnational repression faced by Chinese minority groups, such as Uighurs and Tibetans, and human rights defenders.

Based on the insights presented, the report offers a detailed classification of the main Chinese tactics targeting the Dutch and EU media landscape, which include: (1) the spread of propaganda and disinformation; (2) deals with local media organisations; (3) the expansion of Chinese state media; (4) diplomatic pressure; (5) censorship; as well as (6) deception and obstruction. The report ends with policy recommendations to the Dutch Government, editors and interest groups. It emphasises the importance of strategic communication and firm condemnation of influence and interference from authoritarian countries while preventing any form of discrimination or isolation of Chinese and Asian Dutch people. Media outlets should in turn engage in structural discussions on transnational repression and develop protocols for protecting journalists both in the Netherlands and in authoritarian countries. The report also calls for additional technical support and lists various capacity-building activities which would help address Chinese interference and intimidation.

Susanne Kamerling and Ardi Bouwers, "Chinese influence and interference in the Dutch media landscape" (China Kennisnetwerk, Leiden Asia Centre and Clingendael, 30 October 2024)

https://www.chinakennisnetwerk.nl/sites/ckn/files/2024-11/CKN-report-Chinese-influence-and-interference-in-the-Dutch-media-landscape.pdf

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