



Propagandists plumb "high-skilled" visa program

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Foreign propaganda organs — including those from Russia and China — have used a visa program designed to lure high-skilled workers to the U.S. to place reporters, editors and producers at their American outposts, records show.

Why it matters: The H-1B program is designed to bolster U.S. competitiveness by seeding American firms with educated workers from abroad. Government data shows it's also being used to boost foreign state media operations on U.S. soil.

- Attention on foreign influence is high amid Russia's disinformation campaign surrounding its invasion of Ukraine.
- Data shows Russian and Chinese state media have taken advantage of the H-1B program, as has a U.S. outlet as it worked with a state-funded Saudi broadcaster.

By the numbers: China leads the way by a large margin, with H-1B visa approvals for state-run outlets such as CCTV, People's Daily, China Daily and Xinhua.

- A People's Daily H-1B application filed in 2020, shortly before its most recent approval, requested the visa for a "social media specialist."
- The outlet has worked with a Chinese security agency in recent years to scrape social media for information on "key personnel and organizations" in the U.S. and other countries, the Washington Post reported last year.
- Axios reached out to 10 of the Chinese media organs that have been approved for H-1B visas, as well as the Chinese embassy in Washington, but received just one response.

Other Chinese-language outlets that have taken advantage of the program do not have official state ties but have been accused of airing pro-Beijing propaganda in the U.S. — frequently targeted at the Chinese diaspora community.

- California-based Phoenix TV has had more than a dozen H-1B applications approved by U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services since 2012.

- It's faced allegations from congressional Republicans that it acts as a pro-Beijing mouthpiece.
- Two of the most prolific H-1B employers, Sinovision and China Press, are "discreetly controlled by Chinese authorities," according to Reporters Without Borders.

What they're saying: Sinovision's president, Philip Chang, disputed that characterization during an interview with Axios.

- "That's false information; that's all I want to say," he said.
- Chang said Sinovision needs native Chinese employees because of the thin supply of Mandarin-fluent reporters in the U.S.
- "This kind of personnel is difficult to recruit in this country to begin with," he said.

The U.S. has a separate visa category for foreign reporters, but it recently imposed limits on Chinese media's use of that category.

- Experts also told Axios that H-1B visas can offer more flexibility than the media-focused I visa, which strictly limits recipients' work to newsgathering activities and typically has a shorter length of stay.
- "For long-term employees of a foreign media company, the H-1B visa is often a better option [than the I visa] because it lasts for three years and can be renewed — with the possibility that the worker can be sponsored for a green card," according to Alex Nowrasteh, an immigration policy expert at the Cato Institute.

The big picture: Many of the outlets approved for H-1B visas are frequent purveyors of misinformation aligned with U.S. adversaries.

- In addition to reporting that aligns with Beijing's interest, Chinese state media coverage of the invasion of Ukraine has backed spurious Russian narratives on the war, frequently aimed at attacking the U.S.

Competition for H-1B visas is intense due to a strict cap on the number awarded annually.

Last month, USCIS announced that cap had already been reached for fiscal year 2022.

- Applicants must also submit to State Department screening before the visas are approved. "National security is our top priority when adjudicating visa applications," a State spokesperson told Axios.
- "Every prospective traveler to the United States undergoes extensive security screening. Prohibiting entry to the United States by those who might pose a threat is key to protecting U.S. citizens here at home."

Foreign state media outlets sought those visas as other federal agencies more closely scrutinized foreign government-aligned media in the U.S.

- Russian propaganda outlet RT America's U.S. broadcaster got approval for an H-1B visa in 2015, shortly before it was required to register under the Foreign Agents Registration Act. RT recently announced plans to wind down U.S. operations.
- EDI Media, a California company that got USCIS visa approvals in 2019 and 2020, publishes the U.S. edition of the Xinmin Evening News. The U.S. considers Xinmin a "foreign mission" of Beijing.

Another FARA-registered Chinese-language outlet, Sing Tao, has received more than 20 USCIS approvals since 2012.

- Maine company Prime Time Media got a single approval in 2021, as it worked with a Saudi government-funded broadcaster.
- Elie Nakouzi, Prime Time Media's CEO, told Axios the visa was for a Lebanese employee who predated the firm's work with that Saudi outlet.
- Records show that work ended in January.