News and Perspectives

China Has Moved to Regulate Expertise Online—and the West Should Pay Attention

Tim Bajarin, JMIR Correspondent

Abstract

In late 2025, the Cyberspace Administration of China released new requirements around the provision of online professional advice by users without relevant credentials, as part of broader efforts to curb misinformation. In this *News and Perspectives* article, JMIR Correspondent and long-time PC and consumer technology analyst Tim Bajarin reports his opinion on the potential implications of this initiative for the United States.

Key Takeaways:

- China is enforcing mandatory credential verification for online creators in medicine, law, finance, and education, treating misinformation as a systems problem.
- The United States should not copy China's model but must act urgently with stronger substantiation rules, clearer disclosures, and faster enforcement against deceptive claims—without government-run credentialing.

Tim Bajarin is an industry-leading PC and consumer technology consultant and analyst with a regular column in Forbes. In this op-ed, he shares his thoughts on recent online information regulations in China and their implications for the West.

In late 2025, China did something the rest of the world has been avoiding for years: it admitted the internet can't tell expertise from performance anymore. When someone posts advice on cancer treatment, stock picks, or legal rights, platforms can't reliably tell whether that person has the educational background to back it up or is just great at sounding convincing.

China's solution is stark. The Cyberspace Administration of China rolled out rules requiring platforms to enforce that anyone giving professional advice online in medicine, law, finance, and education prove their credentials or risk losing their platform. Creators must submit degrees, licenses, or certifications to platforms like Douyin, Weibo, and Bilibili for verification. Unverified accounts get—and have gotten—fined or restricted. Platforms that don't comply face fines and account suspensions. The state is treating this kind of online speech as something that can be licensed, audited, and penalized. This is part of a broader crackdown on online misinformation, with penalization of, for example, content perceived as falsely "smearing" government-run programs, AI-generated content without labels, and content failing to appropriately identify and credit information sources.

> "The right question isn't whether this model is safe for democracies. It's whether the West can keep relying on voluntary self-policing from platforms that profit from virality, and whether existing interventions are enough.

That's not necessarily a model Western democracies should copy, but it signals that the global status quo is breaking.

The Problem China Is Tackling

I've watched the tech industry for over 4 decades, and I've seen few problems this thorny. The United States treats misinformation primarily as a content problem. China treats it more as a systems problem. In a platform economy built on speed, confidence, and engagement, the loudest voice wins—not the most accurate one. Algorithms reward emotion over nuance. Virality outcompetes verification. Harmful advice spreads faster than corrections can catch up.

The consequences hit hard. I've seen self-styled "experts" build million-person audiences and dispense dangerous advice about cancer treatments or investment strategies without being held accountable. The boundary between peer recommendation and manufactured authority has collapsed.

Building on this viewpoint, Beijing has identified and taken action on a real and serious problem. Over the past several years, I've watched the influencer economy transform from a novelty into one of the most powerful forces shaping consumer behavior, health decisions, and political opinion. What started as an authentic peer-to-peer recommendation has evolved into something far more consequential and, potentially, far more dangerous. Chinese platforms like Weibo, WeChat, and Douyin have become saturated with self-styled experts confidently dispensing advice on cancer treatments, investment strategies, and legal rights. The core dysfunction isn't simply that some of this advice is wrong. It's that platform algorithms are structurally designed to reward confidence over accuracy and engagement over truth.

The Free-Speech Trade-Off

China's approach raises real objections. Credentialing can become censorship. State authority can silence dissent, protect incumbents, or suppress unconventional expertise and valuable lived experience. These aren't theoretical risks in a country where the government already controls much of the information landscape.

The right question isn't whether this model is safe for democracies. It's whether the West can keep relying on voluntary self-policing from platforms that profit from virality, and whether existing interventions are enough.

What the United States Is Actually Doing

The United States is moving on this issue, but its regulatory actions are narrower in scope than China's. The Federal Trade Commission's (FTC's) FY 2026-2030 Strategic Plan prioritizes fraud and consumer protection, holding tech companies accountable for unlawful conduct. The Consumer Review Rule already bans fake reviews, undisclosed incentives, and manipulated social proof.

> ...Platforms amplify harmful claims faster than regulators can correct them. Once trust is fabricated, corrections become noise.

That's progress. But it's not a substitute for distinguishing expertise from performance at scale, and it doesn't fill the space left behind by platforms scaling back their more formal, larger-scale fact-checking and misinformation efforts.

Here's the gap: online influence shapes how people treat illness, manage money, and understand politics. When that influence is manufactured rather than earned, platforms amplify harmful claims faster than regulators can correct them. Once trust is fabricated, corrections become noise.

What the West Should Learn

The United States, and the West more generally, should take the lesson in urgency but not adopt China's policy. Democracies should resist government-run credentialing of speech and legitimate commentary, even if they are controversial, to avoid undermining one of the most essential rules of a true democracy: the free exchange of ideas. But they should also stop pretending that voluntary moderation works.

While governments do have the right to weigh in on comments that impact their citizens, professional regulatory bodies, such as those in medicine, should take a more proactive role in monitoring commentary in their fields and point out false information as much as possible. A better path: stronger substantiation rules for professional claims, clearer disclosure requirements, faster enforcement against deceptive content, and real accountability when platforms let creators market themselves as experts without proof.

China's move is controversial for good reason, but it highlights a question the West hasn't answered: how do you protect the public from harmful misinformation without giving governments the power to decide who's allowed to sound credible?

The answer matters. The cost of waiting is measurable—and growing.

Keywords: misinformation; disinformation; social media; internet; health communication; information dissemination; credentialing; legislation as topic

Please cite as:
Bajarin T
China Has Moved to Regulate Expertise Online—and the West Should Pay Attention
J Med Internet Res 2026;28:e107872
URL: https://www.jmir.org/2026/1/e107872
doi: 10.2196/107872