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Backgrounders

Media Censorship in China

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Introduction

The Chinese government has long kept tight reins on both traditional and new media to avoid potential subversion of its authority. Its tactics often entail strict media controls using monitoring systems and firewalls, shuttering publications or websites, and jailing dissident journalists, bloggers, and activists. The severity of media censorship grabbed headlines in early January 2013 when *Southern Weekly*, a liberal-leaning paper based in Guangzhou, staged a **week-long confrontation** with the government after local propaganda authorities rewrote a front-page pro-reform editorial. **Google's battle** with the Chinese government over Internet censorship in China, and the Norwegian Nobel Committee's awarding of the 2010 Peace Prize to jailed Chinese activist Liu Xiaobo, have also increased international attention to media censorship in the country. At the same time, the country's burgeoning economy has allowed for greater diversity in China's media coverage, and experts say the growing Chinese demand for information is testing the regime's control.

Official Media Policy

China's **constitution** affords its citizens freedom of speech and press, but the opacity of Chinese media regulations allows authorities to crack down on news stories by claiming that they expose state secrets and thus endanger the country. In April 2010, the Chinese government revised its existing **Law on Guarding State Secrets** to **tighten control** over information flows. The amendment strengthens requirements for Internet companies and telecommunications operators to cooperate with Chinese authorities in investigations into leaks of state secrets. But the definition of state secrets in China remains vague, facilitating censorship of any information that authorities **deem harmful** to their political or economic interests. CFR Senior Fellow **Elizabeth C. Economy** says the Chinese government is in a state of "schizophrenia" about media policy as it "goes back and forth, testing the line, knowing they need press freedom and the information it provides, but worried about opening the door to the type of freedoms that could lead to the regime's downfall."

In May 2010, the government issued its first **white paper** on the Internet that emphasized the concept of "Internet sovereignty," requiring all Internet users in China, including foreign organizations and individuals, to abide by Chinese laws and regulations. Chinese Internet companies are now required to sign the "**Public Pledge** on Self-Regulation and Professional Ethics for China Internet Industry," which entails even stricter rules than those in the white paper, according to **Jason Q. Ng**, a specialist on Chinese media censorship and author of ***Blocked on Weibo***.

How Free Is Chinese Media?

The watchdog group Reporters without Borders ranked China 173 out of 179 countries in its 2013 worldwide **index of press freedom**. Reporters face harassment and jail time for violating rules, and

are effectively pressured into "self-censorship." Former CFR Edward R. Murrow Press Fellow **Matt Pottinger** says that Chinese media outlets usually employ their own monitors to ensure political acceptability of their content. Censorship guidelines are circulated weekly from the Communist Party propaganda department and the government Bureau of Internet Affairs to prominent editors and media providers. A **leaked March 2010 version** lists some of the prohibitions.

"The Chinese Communist Party is just more cunning about how it controls public opinion." —Matt Pottinger

In the past, only state agencies could own media in China, but today there is increased private ownership. **China News Network Corporation (CNC)**, a twenty-four-hour global news network launched in July 2010, for example, is reportedly **half privately financed**. Although the **government claims** that the number of publications has proliferated in recent years, Pottinger argues that the increase has not necessarily delivered plurality to the media landscape in China. The new publications remain "a populist, socialist media, just as controlled by the government," he says. "The seemingly chatty, freewheeling press is not really freewheeling at all. The Chinese Communist Party is just more cunning about how it controls public opinion."

Certain websites that the government deems potentially dangerous—**like Wikipedia**—are blocked during periods of controversy, such as the June 4 anniversary of the Tiananmen Square massacre. **Specific material** considered a threat to political stability is also banned, including controversial photos and search terms. In June 2013, the censorship around the Tiananmen anniversary reached new heights, with Chinese social media blocking even vague, **tertiary references** to the incident.

The government is particularly keen on blocking reports of issues that could incite social unrest, like official corruption and ethnic strife. The websites of Bloomberg and the *New York Times* were blacked out in 2012 after **each ran reports** on the private wealth of Party Secretary Xi Jinping and Premier Wen Jiabao. Restrictions were also placed on micro-blogging services in April 2012 in response to rumors of a coup attempt in Beijing involving the disgraced former Chongqing party chief Bo Xilai. Online media companies Sina Corp. and Tencent Holdings Ltd. were forced to shut down the **commenting function**—a key feature for discussions—for three days. Censors were also **swift to block** any mention of an October 2013 attack on Tiananmen Square by individuals from Xinjiang province, home to the mostly Muslim Uighur minority group.

The Censorship Groups

More than a **dozen government bodies** review and enforce laws related to information flow within, into, and from China. The most powerful monitoring body is the Communist Party's Central Propaganda Department (CPD), which coordinates with General Administration of Press and Publication (GAPP) and State Administration of Radio, Film, and Television (SARFT) to ensure content promotes party doctrine. Xinhua, the state news agency, is widely considered a propaganda tool. Ng says that the various ministries once functioned as smaller fiefdoms of control, but have recently been more consolidated under the State Council Information Office, which has taken the lead on Internet monitoring.

The CPD gives media outlets editorial guidelines as well as directives restricting coverage of politically sensitive topics. In one **high-profile incident** involving liberal Guangdong magazine *Southern Weekly*, government censors rewrote the paper's New Year's message from a call for reform to a tribute to the Communist Party. The move triggered **mass demonstrations** by the staff and general public, who demanded the resignation of the local propaganda bureau chief. While staff and censors reached a

compromise that would theoretically relax some controls, much of the censorship remained in place, and the calls for resignation were ignored.

China's government also tightens censorship in times of political transition; before its Eighteenth National Congress power handover in late 2012, it **issued new rules** requiring Internet users to provide real names to service providers, while assigning Internet companies greater responsibility for reporting forbidden postings to the authorities.

Exerting Control

The Chinese government deploys myriad ways of censoring the Internet. Experts say it includes **technical methods** like bandwidth throttling, keyword filtering, as well as the wholesale blocking of access to websites. Google, after a protracted battle with Chinese authorities over the banning of search terms, quietly **gave up** its fight in early 2013 by turning off a notification that alerted Chinese users of potential censorship. But as Ng points out, the government also employs a diverse range of methods to induce journalists to censor themselves. Such tactics include dismissals and demotions, libel lawsuits, fines, arrests, and the shuttering of news outlets.

> *"Taken together, this is the Chinese government's broadest effort in decades to roll back unwelcome foreign coverage." —Evan Osnos, New Yorker*

Journalists and activists who overstep boundaries can also face prison; as of February 2014, thirty journalists and seventy *netizens*— bloggers, online journalists, or cyber-dissidents—are **imprisoned**, according to Reporters without Borders. In 2009, Chinese rights activist Liu Xiaobo **was sentenced** to eleven years in prison for advocating democratic reforms and freedom of speech in **Charter 08**, which earned him the Nobel Peace Prize. Censors quickly blocked news of the prize within China. A year later, journalist Tan Zuoren **was sentenced** to five years in prison for drawing attention to government corruption and poor construction of school buildings that collapsed and killed thousands of children during the 2008 earthquake in Sichuan province. The Chinese government blocked all inquiries into the issue, and Tan's volunteers were harassed and beaten. Early 2014 saw the government hand a four-year prison sentence to human rights activist Xu Zhiyong, who **observers say** was targeted due to his growing presence on Chinese social media platforms.

The Xi administration, in power since March 2013, has further tightened the reins on journalists. A new **July 2014 directive** on journalist press passes bars reporters from releasing information from interviews or press conferences on social media without permission of their employer media organizations. The government also said it would not grant press passes to those who failed to sign the secrecy agreement.

Publicizing the CPD guidelines also invites punishment, as they may be classified as "state secrets." Such was the case of **Shi Tao**, a journalist who served eight years in jail for detailing, in a Yahoo! email, the CPD's instructions for how to report the fifteenth anniversary of Tiananmen Square. Pottinger adds that on top of such national restrictions, local officials also release their own directives. Some of these have restricted information at the cost of public health, as in early 2014, when China's national poultry association requested provincial governments to **stop reporting** individual cases of H7N9 bird flu infections, fearing damage to profits.

Foreign Media

All inbound data from foreign Internet sources are filtered through one of three **computer centers** in Beijing, Shanghai, and Guangzhou, where keywords alert authorities to provocative content. The

Foreign Correspondents Club of China reported 178 cases of **interference** with foreign media in 2008, but it has since stopped publishing figures on its website to ensure its continued operation.

> *"Some people in China don't look at freedom of speech as an abstract ideal, but more as a means to an end."*
> *—Emily Parker*

Although foreign media can't be censored, international journalists face government intimidation, surveillance, and restrictions on their reporting, writes freelance China correspondent **Paul Mooney**, who was denied a visa in 2013. The government's propaganda bureaus have also cracked down on reporters' involvement with foreign media outlets; veteran journalist **Gao Yu was detained** in May 2014 for allegedly leaking a Party document to the foreign press, and two months later, China Fortune reporter Song Zhibiao was **forced to resign** for writing commentaries for the Hong Kong-based Oriental Press Group. In August 2014, authorities **released Xiang Nanfu**, a contributor to the U.S.-based Chinese-language news website Boxun.com, after detaining him on charges of fabricating stories that disparaged the Chinese government ahead of the twenty-fifth anniversary of the Tiananmen Square massacre.

China requires foreign correspondents to obtain permission before reporting in the country and has used this as an administrative roadblock to prevent journalists from reporting on potentially sensitive topics like corruption. Austin Ramzy, a China reporter for *Time* magazine, relocated to Taiwan in early 2014 after **failing to receive** his accreditation and visa. *New York Times* reporter Chris Buckley was reported to have been expelled in early January 2013—**an incident** China's foreign ministry clarified as a visa application suspension due to improper credentials. China observers were most notably shaken by **the 2013 suspension** of Bloomberg's China correspondent, Michael Forsythe, after Bloomberg journalists accused the news agency of withholding investigative articles for fear of reprisal from Chinese authorities. "Taken together, this is the Chinese government's broadest effort in decades to roll back unwelcome foreign coverage—and that raises the stakes for news organizations that are struggling to figure out how to handle China," writes **Evan Osnos**, a former China correspondent for the *New Yorker*.

The treatment of foreign reporters has become a diplomatic issue. In response to the **Arab Spring** protests in early 2011, then Secretary of State Hillary Clinton pledged to continue U.S. efforts to **weaken censorship** in countries with repressive governments like China and Iran. In response, China warned Washington to **not meddle** in the internal affairs of other countries. On a December 2013 trip to Beijing, Vice President Joe Biden pressed China publicly and privately about press freedom, **directly raising the issue** in talks with Chinese President Xi Jinping and meeting with U.S. journalists working in China. In the wake of Ramzy's denied visa, White House spokesman Jay Carney also issued **a statement** urging China to unblock U.S. media websites and eliminate travel restrictions on journalists.

Circumventing the Censors

Despite the systematic control of news, the Chinese public has found ways to get news past censors through proxy servers and virtual private networks (VPNs), as well as through microblogging sites like Weibo that have become the primary spaces for Chinese netizens to voice opinion or discuss taboo subjects. "Over the years, in a series of cat-and-mouse games, Chinese Internet users have developed an extensive series of puns—both visual and homophonous—slang, acronyms, memes, and images to skirt restrictions and censors," writes Ng.

Google's chairman, Eric Schmidt, said in early 2014 that **encryption could help** the company

penetrate China. But such steps experienced a setback in March 2014 when authorities cracked down on social **networking app WeChat** (known as Weixin in China), deleting prominent, politically liberal accounts. Soon thereafter, the government **announced new regulations** on "instant messaging tools" aimed at mobile chat applications such as WeChat, which has more than 270 million users and was increasingly seen as replacing Weibo as a platform for popular dissent that could skirt censors. CFR's Economy says that the Internet has increasingly become a means for Chinese citizens to ensure official accountability and rule of law, noting the **growing importance** of social network sites as a political force inside China despite government restrictions.

China had roughly **618 million** Internet users as of December 2013. Although there have been **vocal calls** for total press freedom in China, some experts point to a more nuanced discussion of the ways in which the Internet is revolutionizing the Chinese media landscape and a society that is demanding more information. "Some people in China don't look at freedom of speech as an abstract ideal, but more as a means to an end," writes **Emily Parker**. Rather, the fight for free expression fits into a larger context of burgeoning citizen attention to other, more pertinent social campaigns like environmental degradation, social inequality, and corruption—issues for which they use the Internet and media as a means of disseminating information, says Ng.

Isabella Bennett contributed to this report.

Additional Resources

CFR Senior Fellow Elizabeth C. Economy discusses the impact of the Internet on Chinese social protest in this **Congressional testimony**.

This ***Foreign Affairs* Gallery** highlights eleven terms that are blocked on Weibo, and explains why.

Former China correspondent Evan Osnos writes about the cost of covering China in this ***New Yorker* blog post**.

This Winter 2014 **Nieman Report** covers the state of journalism in China.

This **Congressional Research Service** from July 2012 looks at China's Internet freedom and U.S. policy.

Emily Parker discusses freedom of speech and media in China in this ***Guernica* interview**.

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