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China's Media Crackdown Is a Growing Concern

BY MARK C. EADES

Mark C. Eades, a freelance writer based in Shanghai, China, explains that “While state-run Chinese media enjoy unrestricted access to the United States, foreign media, including US media organizations, face increasing restrictions in China.”

Since taking power in January 2013, China's current leadership under President Xi Jinping has unleashed a far-reaching crackdown on both domestic and foreign media in China. This policy has included stepped-up censorship of domestic media, increased restrictions on foreign news organizations and journalists working in China, and unprecedented blocking of foreign news websites. The new strategy is part of a broader ideological crackdown aimed at protecting the Chinese Communist Party's monopoly on political power under conditions of rapid economic, social, and technological change in China.

The result has been tightened restrictions on freedom of expression which include an increase in the number of arrests and imprisonment of Chinese dissidents such as Xu Zhiyong and other members of the New Citizens' Movement, which have also raised concerns in the international human rights community. China's restrictions on foreign media also concern US political and economic interests as international cooperation and dialogue depend on fair media access, a concept that is eluding Chinese government officials. While state-run Chinese media enjoy unrestricted access to the United States, foreign media, including US media organizations, face increasing restrictions in China.

China's record on press freedom is among the world's worst. In the 2014 Reporters Without Borders world press freedom index, China ranked 175th out of 180 countries whereas the United States was placed 46th. Beijing's efforts to restrict foreign news coverage of domestic issues within China include political and economic pressure on foreign news organizations, harassment and expulsion of foreign journalists, cyber-attacks on foreign news websites including the *New York Times*, and blocking foreign news reports that are deemed detrimental or disparaging to the government. Such measures are aimed at limiting critical coverage of the authorities from reaching Chinese citizens. Reports on human rights issues, including freedom of expression and Tibetan rights, and on the financial dealings of Chinese leaders are particular targets for China's censors.

The East-West Center promotes better relations and understanding among the people and nations of the United States, Asia, and the Pacific through cooperative study, research, and dialogue. Established by the US Congress in 1960, the Center serves as a resource for information and analysis on critical issues of common concern, bringing people together to exchange views, build expertise, and develop policy options.

A growing number of US journalists have been expelled from China or threatened with expulsion by having their visa renewals denied or delayed by Chinese authorities since 2012. American and other Western journalists have also been harassed and even physically assaulted by Chinese police. In addition to journalists, US scholars including leading China specialists Perry Link and Andrew Nathan have been denied visas due to the content of their research and publications. This is therefore a concern for anyone reporting or writing from within China, whether a full-time journalist, freelance writer, or scholar conducting research. The caution one must take with “sensitive” topics—human rights, the status of Taiwan, and Tibet—are ever present to any foreign citizen working in China.



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Chinese media, on the other hand, face no such restrictions in the United States. China’s state-run news organizations, including the Xinhua News Agency and China Central Television, have bureaus in New York, Washington, D.C. and across the United States employing hundreds of Chinese correspondents. Chinese media coverage often features increasingly negative coverage and analysis of the United States very much in line with the increasingly nationalistic stance of the central government. Their reporters, however, perform their duties free of interference, obstruction, or harassment from US authorities. Chinese scholars likewise conduct research in the United States without restrictions. This is obviously a highly unequal arrangement.

The issue of press freedom and media access in China has received considerable attention recently from both the US media and policymakers in Washington. China’s reciprocal treatment of US journalists was among one of the issues Vice President Biden raised with Chinese officials during his December 2013 visit to Beijing. The US Congressional-Executive Commission on China (CECC) met the same month to discuss the topic of unfair treatment of foreign journalists working in China. CECC chair Senator Sherrod Brown (D-OH) issued a strongly worded statement on behalf of journalists condemning Chinese treatment of foreign journalists working in China. Senator Brown further elaborated that this is not only an issue of press freedom within China, but also addresses a core US interest regarding the US-China bilateral relationship. China clearly has an interest in media access to the United States, which it enjoys without restrictions. The United States likewise has an interest in unrestricted free media access to China. Furthermore, the United States also has an interest in protecting US citizens working in China. The question is what the United States should do to remedy the problem.

The solution most frequently offered and debated is that of taking visa reciprocity measures against China. This would mean subjecting Chinese media to retaliatory US visa limits as a means of pressuring China to comply with international standards of fair media access and treatment of journalists. The logic behind such an approach is simply that, if China wants unrestricted media access to the United States, then it must allow reciprocal access to US media. Recent advocates of this approach have included the *Washington Post* editorial board and Elizabeth Economy of the Council on Foreign Relations.

Others have opposed visa reciprocity measures on the grounds that retaliatory limits on US visas for Chinese reporters could reflect badly on America’s commitment to press freedom, legitimize China’s tactics, or set off a bilateral visa war. Among those opposed is the Committee to Protect Journalists, voicing particular opposition to targeting such measures at ordinary Chinese journalists working in the United States.

In contrast, Elizabeth Lynch at *China Law & Policy* favors targeting those Chinese officials who are responsible for the unfair treatment of foreign journalists in China, namely people associated with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Public Security Bureau. Freelance journalist Paul Mooney, who was recently expelled after eighteen years in China, suggested that Chinese media executives with close ties to the Chinese Communist Party and its propaganda department might also be effective targets for such measures.

Others, including China-based freelance writer Bill Bishop, have suggested linking fair media access to investment and trade negotiations such as those on the US-China Bilateral Investment Treaty currently underway. As *Wall Street Journal* economic journalist Bob Davis recently observed, however, such an approach may be insufficient to meaningfully alter US-China relations any time soon. These negotiations are notoriously slow, and may lack the necessary incentives to extract significant concessions from Beijing.

In any case, US inaction on the matter is no longer an option. China’s restrictions on press freedom and media access are intensifying, and statements of concern or protest from Washington are having no effect. Concrete measures that China cannot ignore are necessary.

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