

Censorship and Evolving Media Policy in China

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Abstract

This paper discusses several facets of Chinese media, both historic and modern. It analyzes the effect China's political history has had on modern media and juxtaposes the modernity of China's business industry and its acceptance of free enterprise with its reproach of free speech. It also describes the tenuous relationships between mainland China and the independent regions of Hong Kong and Taiwan, which each have modern, free media policies. Finally, it discusses China's treatment of foreign media, particularly during the 2008 Summer Olympics, and how China has relaxed some of its stringent policies for the purpose of increased globalization.

I. Background

The People's Republic of China is one of the largest and most populous countries on earth, and its political and economic power is increasing rapidly. According to the Council on Foreign Relations, there are more than 2,000 newspapers, 8,000 magazines, 374 television stations and 150 million Internet users in China, and all of these media outlets and media consumers are subject to government gatekeeping and censorship. From a foreign perspective, the juxtaposition of China's remarkable technological advancement, business savvy and cultural influence to its continued control of the media is astonishing and, in many ways, unique to China. Somehow, despite the fact that China is quickly becoming a new world leader that rivals the United States, the government has been able to maintain old-world communistic policies toward its media but modern capitalistic policies toward the rest of its industries.

II. History of Domestic Policy

In 2007, the international organization Reporters Without Borders ranked the level of press freedom in 169 countries, and the People's Republic of China fell at number 163. The introduction of the Internet to China has done little to increase its citizens' freedom of speech; of the 64 known people worldwide who have

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been imprisoned for their activity online, 50 were sentenced in China (Reporters Without Borders, 2007). According to a spokesperson for Reporters Without Borders, “the reforms and the releases of imprisoned journalists so often promised by the authorities seem to be a vain hope” (2007). While China’s constitution technically allows for freedom of speech and press, the vague language of the regulation gives the government the power to censor information that it considers inconsistent with the values of the country. Because the regulations can be interpreted so broadly, the government is able to legally censor almost anything.

Hu Jintao, the current president of China, has maintained the strict media regulations established by his predecessors despite speculation that he may allow the Chinese media to reach the same level of modernization and globalization as Chinese business and technology (Bhattacharji & Zissis, 2008). Hu’s conservative stance may be a reaction to the introduction of the Internet in China, which has exposed Chinese citizens to foreign press material that sometimes contradicts or undermines China’s laws and values. The Internet has also given Chinese citizens a forum to express anti-government views. In some cases, the government has punished cyber dissidents with imprisonment. But it is likely that the Chinese government does not receive more opposition from its citizens because, since its inception, the PRC (People’s Republic of China) has never allowed a free media.

The PRC was established in 1949 as a Communist party-led state under the leader Mao Zedong, who helped restore the war-torn China with an economic and political agenda modeled after the former Soviet Union. Mao also wanted to create a social structure similar to that of the Soviet Union, so he allowed very little government transparency and very little press freedom in order to ensure the obedience and cooperation of the PRC citizens. After Mao’s death in 1976, Deng Xiaoping took over the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) and adopted new political approaches that allowed for better foreign relations and economic and legal reform (U.S. Department of State, 2009).

According to the U.S. Department of State (2009), Chinese Journalists and writers had more critical and artistic freedom under Deng but were still prohibited from making direct criticisms of the CCP. Frustrated that the CCP was not encouraging more drastic reform, young Chinese citizens staged a series of protests from 1986 through 1989 that culminated in the infamous protest in Tiananmen Square in the capital city of Beijing. The Chinese military responded violently to this protest, using any means possible to clear dissidents from the streets. Though the government has no official numbers, witnesses of the protest believe that soldiers killed several hundred citizens that day. To date, it is nearly impossible to find information about Tiananmen Square in China, and many Chinese citizens know nothing about it.

When Mao Zedong was in power, he assigned four tasks to the media: to propagate the policies of the Communist Party, to educate the masses, to organize the masses and to mobilize the masses. Under Mao, the government served as the main source of funds for news outlets until the needs of the media grew more expensive than the government could afford (Yin, 2006, p. 34). Now that the modern Chinese media support themselves, journalists have some power to challenge the government and socialist media policies, though they don’t always take advantage of it.

Though Deng Xiaoping instated an open-door policy in China and made some capitalistic reforms to the socialist economy, he did little to reform the structure of the mass media (Yin, 2006, p.35). This is evidenced by the coverage, or rather lack of coverage, of the 1989 Tiananmen Square Student Movement. Deng made it clear that, just like Mao Zedong, he wouldn’t tolerate any subversion of the government.

III. Modern Domestic Policy

According to the Congressional-Executive Commission on China (2006), there are several government agencies that exert control over the media, including the State Administration of Radio, Film and Television; the Ministry for Information Industry; the Ministry of Public Security; the General Administration for Customs and the State Secrecy Bureau. Additionally, the General Administration of Press and Publication (GAPP) is responsible for screening all print material and enforcing prior restraint, and all publishers, including Internet publishers, are required to receive a license by GAPP. GAPP has the power to deny a publisher a license or to take one away. The State Council Information Office controls the content of the Internet, and any news organizations or private organizations that post on the Internet have to report to it, and any information they post can be pre-screened. Finally, the Central Propaganda Department screens publications for any content related to the government, and it educates publishers and editors about what types of information can

be published and what ideologies can be represented in print.

In addition to the various government agencies that directly influence Chinese media through policy and legislation, the *People's Daily* newspaper serves as the official news outlet of the Chinese Communist Party. With a worldwide circulation of between 3 million and 4 million, the paper also serves as an unofficial guide for every other Chinese media source, determining what issues can and cannot be covered and from what angle they must be addressed (Yin, 2006, p. 36). For instance, while the *People's Daily* writes frequently about the economy and the benefits of globalization, it does not cover issues related to social justice, human rights or the environment. Yin (2006) says this gatekeeping is used as a way to "cultivate a new elite urban consumer class in China by constructing a consumerist culture. ... This elite consumer class in turn supplies a lucrative market for transnational corporations and Chinese businesses." The *People's Daily* furthers China's economic agenda while continuing to turn a blind eye to potential social injustices committed by the government. Because most other Chinese media outlets follow suit, issues related to social and environmental justice continue to be ignored throughout the country.

While the chilling effect caused by the Chinese government is an effective control over most of the mainstream media, the Internet has presented new challenges to censorship that the government is still struggling to overcome. The U.S. State Department estimated that the CCP has between 30,000 and 50,000 citizens serving as Internet monitors — reviewing Web sites, blogs, e-mails, chat rooms and forums for any questionable material (Bhattacharji & Zissis, 2008). The job of the Internet monitors has been made somewhat easier by the fact that all of the Internet service providers in China are owned or supported by the state (Endeshaw, 2004, p.46), but because the Internet has an infinite amount of space for information, it is impossible for these monitors to catch everything.

According to Assafa Endeshaw (2004), when the Internet became widespread in the early 1990s, China's original instinct was to ban it altogether. It learned quickly, however, that the Internet was an essential tool for globalization and that Chinese businesses could not thrive without it. From that point forward, the government has been engaged in what Endeshaw calls a "cat and mouse game" between regulation and deregulation of information technology.

Because it is impossible for government agencies to monitor the online activities of hundreds of millions of individuals, China shifted its focus to Internet service providers and gave the providers the burden of monitoring their users. For instance, most blog-hosting Web sites require their users to pay a registration fee and turn over their personal information before they are given an account. This lack of privacy encourages self-censorship on the part of the account-holders (Kang & Yang, 2009). The government has also begun monitoring Internet cafés more closely by requiring café owners to obtain certification and by limiting the circumstances under which youth can enter the cafés (Endeshaw, 2004, p. 46). In recent years, the government has shut down ISPs (Internet Service Providers) that have not complied with regulations. Responding to this threat with greater self-censorship, several ISPs organized with the China Internet Association in 2002 to create a "pact" or "pledge" with the purpose of "safeguarding the information safety of the State, upholding the overall interests of the industry and the interests of the users, and improving the service quality of the industry" (Endeshaw, 2004, p. 48).

The government and ISPs use software that searches the Internet for particular terms and word combinations that may relate to sensitive social and political issues like Tiananmen Square, Tibet and Taiwan independence, or the controversial religious movement known as Falun Gong. In September 2002 before the November Party Congress, the government blocked access to the search engines Google and AltaVista, forcing its citizens to redirect their searches to government-approved search engines (Endeshaw, 2004, p. 47). In 2007, the government shut down several Internet data servers, and therefore thousands of Web sites, to prevent any controversial political commentary leading up to the National Congress of the Chinese Communist Party (McMahon, 2008). Despite the preventive actions the government has taken with the Internet, it still serves as the best source for sensitive or controversial information. For instance, it was through the Internet that Chinese citizens first heard news about an AIDS epidemic in the Henan province, the subpar safety conditions in Chinese mines and the 2005 poisoning of the Songhua river (McMahon, 2008).

In November 2005, Shanghai hosted the first Chinese Blogger Conference, and bloggers wrote about and filmed the activities of the conference free from censorship (Mackinnon, 2008, p. 83). However, while there are somewhere between 20-50 million bloggers in China today, there is no such thing as a "political blogosphere" like there is in the United States because very few of those millions of bloggers actually address political issues. In fact, most Internet users have not been exposed to political blogs because some

of the largest and most popular blog-hosting sites like Blogspot.com and Wordpress.com are inaccessible on Chinese ISPs (Mackinnon, 2008, p. 84). Bloggers use their accounts for the same purposes that most Chinese citizens use the Internet — for entertainment. Mackinnon speculates that most Chinese citizens are satisfied with the material they are able to access online because they are not using the Internet as a primary source of news. There is, however, a growing population of Chinese citizens who are using the blogosphere to discuss sensitive issues unrelated to politics, such as their experiences with homosexuality (Kang & Yang, 2009, p. 21). While homosexuality may still be a controversial topic in socially conservative China, the government has made little effort to stifle this type of speech. Though there are some ways for political bloggers to fly under the government's radar, like by using proxy technology or foreign e-mail services that allow them to circumvent filters, most bloggers do not take advantage of this technology either because they don't have the expertise to use it, or because they fear getting caught (Mackinnon, 2008, p. 84).

IV. Relationship to Hong Kong

The Hong Kong Special Administrative Region, which comprises more than 7 million people, lies on the coast of southeast China on the South China Sea. Hong Kong has never been an independent state — China surrendered control of the region to Great Britain in 1842 and did not regain it until July 1997. The Sino-British Joint Declaration, which was written in 1984 when the transition began, and Hong Kong's constitution, known as "Basic Law," dictate that for the 50 years following Hong Kong's reversion, the region will maintain political, economic and judicial independence (U.S. Department of State, 2009). Hong Kong now operates within a "one country, two systems" theory that has allowed it to maintain a certain level of autonomy from China, including autonomy over its press. As in America and, for that matter, in China, Hong Kong's constitution gives the region's residents "freedom of speech, of the press, and of publication" (Lee, 2007, p. 135). Despite this, the mainland Chinese government has been able to exert some subtle control over Hong Kong media, particularly when it comes to the reportage of international issues. Before the British handover, the PRC warned Hong Kong's media that any advocacy for Taiwan/Tibet independence, any engagement in subversive activities or any personal attacks on government leaders were strictly forbidden (Lee, 2007, p. 136).

Though the PRC does not technically control the reportage of Hong Kong's local news, it does make attempts at controlling the distribution of finances and the hiring and firing of top executives at the region's news outlets. It also openly criticizes some of the behaviors of Hong Kong's media and, in a handful of instances, the mainland government has jailed Hong Kong-based reporters for vague and questionable reasons. In 1994, after a court case that was shrouded in secrecy, the PRC sentenced reporter Xi Yang to 12 years in prison for stealing state secrets — a term that is still very loosely defined (Lee, 2007, p. 136). In 2005, a Hong Kong-based reporter for *Singapore's Straits Times* was arrested by the mainland government and sentenced to five years in prison for writing about leaders within the Chinese Communist Party (Bhat-tacharji & Zissis, 2008). Through these means, the mainland government is able to create some self-censorship on the part of Hong Kong's journalists who fear potential backlash. A 2006 study revealed that 26.6 percent of Hong Kong journalists felt that self-censorship among their colleagues was "very serious." On the other hand, 47.2 percent acknowledged that self-censorship existed, "but is not very serious" (Lee, 2007, p. 139). Despite speculation to the contrary, Lee (2007) suggests that many journalists who provide "objective" or "self-censored" reporting do so not out of fear of the PRC, but simply because they feel no animosity toward it. Because several decades have passed since the beginning of Hong Kong's reversion, the citizens and officials of Hong Kong and the PRC have interacted frequently for cultural, social and economic reasons. Lee believes these positive interactions have led to a closer bond between the citizens of Hong Kong and the mainland and perhaps to a greater respect for the mainland government. Another 2006 study revealed that 45.5 percent of Hong Kong citizens trust the mainland government, versus only 24.5 percent a decade earlier in 1996 (Lee, 2007, p. 141). That means that about half of Hong Kong citizens are still skeptical about the PRC and its communist agenda. Since the early 1990s, a number of popular talk radio shows and a newspaper called *Apple Daily* have provided Hong Kong citizens with critical left-wing analyses of the news (Lee, 2007, p. 138). Their success has proven there is a market for pro-democracy speech in Hong Kong and, likely, in mainland China as well.

V. Relationship to Taiwan

Taiwan, known as the Republic of China, is an island that lies several hundred miles off the coast of southeastern China. Japan ruled Taiwan from 1895 through 1945 when it relinquished control of the island to mainland China. Following World War II, the Chinese Communist Party, led by Mao Zedong, and its rival, the Nationalist Chinese Party, led by Chiang Kai-shek, fought a bitter, four-year civil war. In the end, the CCP was able to maintain control of the People's Republic of China, and two million Nationalists fled the country for Taiwan and established the Republic of China (U.S. Department of State, 2009). The Nationalist party, known as KMT, is still in power today.

According to the U.S. Department of State (2009), until 2001, the KMT prevented any cross-Strait relations between the ROC and PRC, still embittered by the events of the civil war. Since 2001, the Taiwanese government has taken steps to revitalize travel and trade between the two nations. In eight short years, China has become Taiwan's number one trading partner, and Taiwan and Hong Kong have become two of China's largest financial investors. Their relationship, though, is still a tenuous one. China considers Taiwan a part of the PRC, whereas the Taiwanese government considers itself an independent democracy. Both on mainland China and in Hong Kong, any discussion of or advocacy for Taiwan independence by the media is a punishable act (Lee, 2007, p. 135).

Like Hong Kong, Taiwan maintains very free media. In fact, it is considered to have some of the freest media in Asia. According to the *CIA World Factbook* (2007), Taiwan has 5.704 million Internet hosts, 15.143 million Internet users, 76 television broadcast stations and 164 AM and FM radio stations. All of Taiwan's newspapers are privately owned, and many broadcast news sources present partisan views (BBC News, 2009). A study conducted in 1997 determined that Taiwanese journalists share more values with American journalists than they do with Chinese journalists, despite the strong cultural similarities between Taiwan and China (Zhu, Weaver, Lo, Chen, & Wu, 1997, p. 86). Perhaps it is because Taiwan has such a free media that few scholars have studied Taiwanese news coverage, including the coverage of cross-Strait relations (Han, 2007, p. 46).

VI. Relationship to Foreign Press

In 2007, Beijing, the capital of the People's Republic of China, was given the privilege of hosting the 2008 Summer Olympic Games. This was a promising benchmark for the PRC on its path to globalization. While the Chinese government did a lot to prepare its infrastructure for the Olympic Games, it did not make as many media policy changes as foreign news outlets had hoped. In September 2007, the government instituted a new policy that foreign journalists cannot distribute stories to the Chinese people unless the articles are passed through the domestic, state-run Xinhua news agency for pre-screening. In response to this policy, the French branch of Reporters Without Borders said, "It is outrageous that Xinhua, the Communist Party mouthpiece, should claim full powers over news agencies. Xinhua is establishing itself as a predator of both free enterprise and free information" (McLaughlin, 2006, p. 68). In spite of the new policy, the Beijing Olympics committee promised that foreign journalists, who numbered at more than 20,000, would be able to move freely throughout the country without visas and that they would be able access information without interference.

China's treatment of foreign journalists is similar to its treatment of locals — the rules and requirements for foreign journalists are written in such vague language that they are difficult to interpret, and criminal charges are difficult to refute. According to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, foreign correspondents "shall not engage in activities which are incompatible with their status or tasks, or which endanger China's national security, unity or community and public interests." More than one American journalist has been punished for crossing these fuzzy boundaries. In 1989 following the protests in Tiananmen Square, *Washington Post* correspondent John Pomfret was deported from China for stealing state secrets and violating provisions of martial law. In 2006, after covering protests for Tibet independence, the Associated Press Beijing Bureau Chief Charles Hutzler got harassing phone calls and text messages multiple times an hour for several days, some even making death threats (McLaughlin, 2008, p. 48). Calum MacLeod, the Beijing Bureau Chief for *USA Today*, has been harassed and detained by government officials on more than one occasion — once for interviewing religious protestors and once for attempting to investigate police corruption (McLaughlin, 2006, p.

69-70). These journalists' experiences are not unique. The results of a survey conducted in 2006 by the Foreign Correspondents Club of China revealed that at least 38 foreign journalists had been detained in China since 2004. Most of those journalists were covering sensitive social and environmental issues like HIV/AIDS, land disputes and anti-pollution protests (Thompson, 2008).

But the Chinese government did come through on some of its promises to Olympics' correspondents, at least as a result of complaints to the International Olympic Committee. For the first time, journalists and some citizen Internet users were able to view Web sites that had previously been blocked, like Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch and BBC News. Web pages regarding issues like Tibet independence and the Falun Gong, however, remained censored (Spencer, 2008).

On November 16, 2009, President Barack Obama held a town hall meeting in Shanghai, one of China's largest cities. He spoke to Chinese students about the future of U.S. and Chinese relations and about the importance of free media and citizens' ability to hold their government accountable. Though some pundits said Obama's criticism of Chinese media wasn't stringent enough, he did emphasize the American values of freedom of expression and information, and political participation. Ironically, even Obama's anti-censorship speech was censored by the Chinese government — a local Shanghai TV station only broadcast certain parts of the meeting (Branigan, 2009). Though Obama did not exert as much political pressure as some free media activists may have liked, the American government's stance on Chinese policy may eventually force the CCP to make real changes. America is one of China's most powerful business partners, and as China races toward globalization it will have to adopt some of the capitalistic and democratic policies that have contributed to America's economic and political success. The growth of the Internet and other information technologies may also contribute to China's eventual policy change. As Chinese citizens become more technologically savvy, their ability to seek and distribute information will surpass the government's ability to filter it. Ultimately, the pervasiveness of the Internet and China's economic ambitions will lead to a freer media, whether it is because the government allows it or simply can no longer prevent it.

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