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. Google's battle with the Chinese government over Internet censorship, and the Norwegian Nobel Committee's awarding of the 2010 Peace Prize to jailed Chinese activist Liu Xiaobo, have also increased international attention to censorship issues. At the same time, the country's burgeoning economy relies on the web for growth, and experts say the growing need for Internet freedom 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 endanger the country. 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?

Former CFR Edward R. Murrow Press Fellow Matt Pottinger says 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.

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. 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 news service and the New York Times were blacked out in 2012 after each ran reports on the private wealth of then 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. 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 out 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 and State Administration of Radio, Film, and Television to ensure content promotes party doctrine. 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.

Some estimates say that the government employs roughly 100,000 people, hired both by the state and private companies, to constantly monitor China’s Internet. Additionally, the CPD gives media outlets editorial guidelines as well as directives restricting coverage of politically sensitive topics. In one high-profile incident involving the 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.

Exerting Control

The Chinese government deploys myriad ways of censoring the Internet. The Golden Shield Project, colloquially known as the Great Firewall, is the center of the government’s online censorship and surveillance effort. Its methods include bandwidth throttling, keyword filtering, and blocking access to
certain websites. According to Reporters Without Borders, the firewall makes large-scale use of Deep Packet Inspection technology to block access based on keyword detection. As Ng points out, the government also employs a diverse range of methods to induce journalists to censor themselves, including dismissals and demotions, libel lawsuits, fines, arrests, and forced televised confessions.

As of December, 2014, forty-four journalists were imprisoned in China, according to the Committee to Protect Journalists, a U.S.-based watchdog on press freedom issues. 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, a 2008 statement signed by more than two thousand prominent Chinese citizens that called for political and human rights reforms and an end to one-party rule. When Liu won the Nobel Peace Prize, censors blocked the news in 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. Early 2014 saw the government detain Gao Yu, a columnist who was jailed on accusations of leaking a Party communiqué titled Document 9.

The State Internet Information Office tightened content restrictions in 2013 and appointed a new director of a powerful Internet committee led by President Xi Jinping, who assumed power in late 2012. A 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. And in early 2015, the government cracked down on virtual private networks (VPNs), making it more difficult to access U.S. sites like Google and Facebook. “By blocking these tools, the authorities are leaving people with fewer options and are forcing most to give up on circumvention and switch to domestic services,” writes Charlie Smith [pseudonym], a co-founder of FreeWeibo.com and activist website GreatFire.org. “If they can convince more Internet users to use Chinese services—which they can readily censor and easily snoop on—then they have taken one further step towards cyber sovereignty.” The restrictions mount on a regular basis, adds the New Yorker’s Evan Osnos. “To the degree that China’s connection to the outside world matters, the digital links are deteriorating,” he wrote in an April 2015 article. “How many countries in 2015 have an Internet connection to the world that is worse than it was a year ago?”

Foreign Media

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. Eighty percent of respondents in a 2014 survey conducted by the Foreign Correspondents’ Club of China said their work conditions had worsened or stayed the same compared to 2013. International journalists regularly face government intimidation, surveillance, and restrictions on their reporting, writes freelance China correspondent Paul Mooney, who was denied a visa in 2013.

Austin Ramzy, a China reporter for the New York Times, 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 said was 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.

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, Beijing 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.

**U.S. Technology in China**

In more recent years, China has made it exceedingly difficult for foreign technology firms to compete within the country. The websites of U.S. social media outlets like Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram are blocked. 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. In late 2014, China banned Google’s email service Gmail, a move that triggered a concerned response from the U.S. State Department.

In January 2015, China issued new cybersecurity regulations that would force technology firms to submit source code, undergo rigorous inspections, and adopt Chinese encryption algorithms. The move triggered an outcry from European and U.S. companies, who lobbied governmental authorities for urgent aid in reversing the implementation of new regulations. CFR’s Adam Segal writes that although the Chinese government has promoted these types of policies in the past, “the fact that the regulations come from the central leading group, and that they seem to reflect an ideologically driven effort to control cyberspace at all levels, make it less likely that Beijing will back down.”

**Circumventing the Censors**

Despite the systematic control of news, the Chinese public has found numerous ways to circumvent censors. Ultrasurf, Psiphon, and Freegate are popular software programs that allow Chinese users to set up proxy servers to avoid controls. While VPNs are also popular, the government crackdown on the systems have led users to devise other methods, including the insertion of new IP addresses into host files, Tor—a free software program for anonymity—or SSH tunnels, which route all Internet traffic through a remote server. According to Congress, between 1 and 8 percent (PDF) of Chinese Internet users use proxy servers and VPNs to get around firewalls.

Microblogging sites like Weibo have also become 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 642 million Internet users in 2014. 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.