

COUNCIL *on* FOREIGN RELATIONS

[Home](#) > [China](#) > [Media Censorship In China](#)

Backgrounder

Media Censorship in China

Author: **Isabella Bennett**, Research Associate

Updated: March 7, 2011

1. [Introduction](#)
2. [What is the official media policy in China?](#)
3. [How free is Chinese media?](#)
4. [What are the primary censoring agencies in China?](#)
5. [How does China exert media controls?](#)
6. [How does China control the influence of foreign media?](#)
7. [How do journalists get around media control measures?](#)

Introduction

The Chinese government has long tried to keep a tight rein on traditional and new media to prevent any challenges to its political authority. This has often entailed, watchdog groups say, strict media controls using monitoring systems, shutting down publications or websites, and jailing of dissident journalists and blogger/activists. China's censorship of its media again grabbed headlines in early 2011, when, following an online appeal for Chinese citizens to emulate the revolutions in the Middle East, the government [clamped down on foreign media \(AP\)](#), arrested dissidents, and mobilized thousands of policemen. Google's battle with the Chinese government over Internet censorship in China and the awarding of the 2010 Nobel Peace Prize to jailed Chinese activist Liu Xiaobo have also drawn increased international attention to media censorship in China. 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 over the media.

What is the official media policy in China?

As China becomes a major player in the global economy, authorities in Beijing are trying to balance the need for more information with their goal of controlling content and maintaining power. 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."

China's [constitution](#) affords its citizens freedom of speech and press, but Chinese law includes media regulations with vague language that authorities use to claim stories endanger the country by sharing state secrets. In April 2010, the Chinese government revised its existing [Law on Guarding State Secrets](#) to [tighten its control over information flows \(WSJ\)](#). The amendment extended requirements to Internet companies and telecommunications operators to cooperate with Chinese authorities in investigations into leaks of state secrets. But as many observers note, the definition of state secrets in China

remains vague and thus could be used to censor any information the authorities deem as harmful to their political or economic interests. "In the new law, [the definition of state secrets](#) remains as sweeping as the original law and still fails to comply with international human rights standards," says the nongovernmental advocacy group Human Rights in China.

In May 2010, the government issued its first [white paper on the Internet](#) in which it emphasized the concept of "Internet sovereignty," requiring all Internet users in China, including foreign organizations and individuals, to abide by Chinese laws and regulations. Analyst Rebecca MacKinnon, an expert on global Internet policy, writes "[the regime actually uses the Internet](#) not only to extend its control but also to enhance its legitimacy."

How free is Chinese media?

The watchdog group Reporters without Borders ranked China 171 out of 178 countries in its 2010 worldwide [index of press freedom](#). Journalists face harassment and prison terms for violating rules laid down by the government and are therefore pressured into "self-censorship." CFR Press Fellow [Matt Pottinger](#) explains that Chinese media disseminators usually employ their own monitors to ensure political acceptability of their content.

Censorship guidelines are often circulated weekly from the Communist Party propaganda department and the government Bureau of Internet Affairs to prominent editors. A [leaked March 2010 version \(NYT\)](#) offers some insight into the prohibitions listed.

China's media is undergoing a process of commercialization, which some observers believe is leading to growing competition, diversified content, and an increase in investigative reporting by Chinese news agencies. Only state agencies can own media in China, but there is creeping privatization. [China News Network Corporation \(CNC\)](#), a twenty-four-hour global news network launched in July 2010, for example, is reportedly [half privately financed](#).

According to a [government report](#), the number of publications has soared in recent years, with over eight thousand magazines, more than two thousand newspapers, and some 374 television stations in the country. However, Pottinger argues that the plethora of newspapers has not delivered plurality to the media landscape in China. The myriad 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 are [blocked during periods of controversy \(Telegraph\)](#) such as the BBC's Chinese language website, the *New York Times'* website, and Wikipedia. [Specific material](#) deemed a threat to political stability such as controversial photos, search terms, or particular iPhone applications are also banned.

What are the primary censoring agencies in China?

[More than a dozen government bodies \(NYT\)](#) are involved in reviewing and enforcing 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 make sure content promotes party doctrine. Xinhua, the state news agency, is considered a propaganda tool by press freedom organizations. The CPD gives media outlets directives restricting coverage of politically sensitive topics--such as protests, Tibet, and Taiwan.

The CPD guidelines are enforced through directives issued to heads of media outlets, demanding that they kill controversial stories and instructing how to cover delicate topics. For example, in March 2010, thirteen daily Chinese newspapers [were censored](#) and threatened with punishment when they published a joint editorial calling for the elimination of "[hukou](#)," a [household registration system](#) that limits the access of rural migrant workers to public services guaranteed to urban residents. The editorial was removed from the newspapers' websites within hours of its posting.

Journalists who do not follow the rules face reprisals in the workplace or, worse, prison terms. Tan Zuoren was [sentenced to five years in prison \(CSMonitor\)](#) 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. All inquiries into the issue were blocked by the Chinese government and Zuoren's volunteers were also harassed or beaten.

Publicizing the CPD guidelines also invites punishment, as they may be classified as "state secrets," such as in the case of Shi Tao, a journalist detained in 2004 who is serving a ten-year sentence for posting an online summary describing the CPD's instructions for how to report the fifteen-year anniversary of events at Tiananmen Square.

Pottinger adds that on top of such national restrictions, provincial and local officials release their own directives. Often times, these directives can be detrimental to public health, as in 2008 when local government officials delayed reports (FT) of contaminated milk that sickened hundreds of thousands of children.

How does China exert media controls?

The Chinese government employs a diverse range of methods to induce journalists to censor themselves rather than risk punishment. Tactics include dismissals and demotions; authorities also sue journalists for libel, impose fines or close news outlets. Furthermore, it is not uncommon for journalists who overstep boundaries to be imprisoned. As of December 2010, China was tied with Iran for the most jailed journalists in a single country with at least thirty-four journalists imprisoned according to the Committee to Protect Journalists.

Reporters without Borders estimates that seventy-seven "netizens" and cyber dissidents are also jailed. Chinese rights activist Liu Xiaobo was sentenced (Guardian) to eleven years in prison for publishing controversial opinions on the Internet and calling for democratic reforms and freedom of speech in Charter 08, which earned him the Nobel Peace Prize. Censors reacted fiercely to block the news about the Nobel from penetrating China. Beijing refused to release Liu from prison for the Nobel ceremony and stepped up anti-Nobel rhetoric (BBC) to discredit the award.

How does China control the influence of foreign media?

China requires foreign correspondents to get permission before making reporting trips within the country, and reporters often face harassment if they cover delicate issues. All inbound data from foreign Internet sources is filtered through one of three computer centers (NYT) in Beijing, Shanghai, and Guangzhou where keywords alert authorities of provocative content.

As part of its bid to host the 2008 Olympics, China promised to relax constraints, but critics accuse China of reneging on its promise. The Foreign Correspondents Club of China reported 178 cases of interference (including detention, harassment, property destruction, and violence) with foreign media in 2008. Some journalists and bloggers arrested before and after the 2008 Beijing Olympics remain in prison as of February 2011. In addition, China continues to filter foreign (and domestic) content on the Internet--in many cases using technology provided by U.S. companies as this Backgrounder notes.

In response to the early 2011 protests that rocked the Middle East and led to the ouster of prominent autocrats in Tunisia and Egypt, Secretary Hillary Clinton pledged to continue U.S. efforts to weaken censorship in countries with repressive governments like China and Iran. In response, China warned the United States to not meddle in internal affairs (BBC) of other countries, consistent with its usual response to foreign objections of its media repression. Experts say criticism coming from outside China has little effect on its policy.

How do journalists get around media control measures?

Despite the systematic control of news in China--the U.S. State Department estimates China has between thirty thousand and fifty thousand Internet monitors--editors and journalists find ways to get news past the censors. Some analysts say the primary space for freedom of speech in China is the blogosphere, where journalists use humor and political satire to criticize the Chinese government. Bloggers also spell out Chinese characters phonetically or substitute (WSJ) "similar-sounding innocuous characters" to circumvent censorship tools.

In a February 2011 testimony before the U.S.-China Economic and Security Review Commission, CFR's Economy notes how the Internet has increasingly become a means for Chinese citizens to ensure official accountability and rule of law. She also

notes the growing importance of social network sites like Twitter as a political force inside China despite government restrictions on them.

In August 2009, Chinese web users won a rare victory over Internet censorship, as China "indefinitely postponed" the installment of censorship software dubbed as the [Green Dam Youth Escort \(TIME\)](#), that would systematically block certain websites on all new computers, after an enormous public outcry from Chinese Internet users and foreign computer manufacturers.

China has an estimated [420 million](#) Internet users, and opinions differ on how deeply the Internet is revolutionizing the Chinese media landscape. Some news reports illuminate the difficulty of censoring the Internet as stories [slip through government information firewalls \(Atlantic\)](#).

Bob Dietz, Asia Program coordinator for the [Committee to Protect Journalists](#), predicts press freedom "will expand to meet the needs and demands not just of the government but of the society." Chinese media broke the news about official suppression of information about the 2003 SARS outbreak in Beijing. Similarly, after toxic chemicals leaked into a river and contaminated drinking water in the northeast city of Harbin in 2005, newspapers and websites criticized government response, demanded greater transparency, and posted photos of area residents stockpiling bottled water.

But Pottinger counters that such evaluations "have been proved wrong by the Chinese government." He adds: "They've cleared pretty significant obstacles in the past in order to institute effective censorship and self-censorship."

Since 2010, Internet users are required to [register with their real names \(Telegraph\)](#) before inputting a comment on a chat room or discussion forum. Such legislation chips away at the anonymity that has fostered the freer criticism in recent years and may foreshadow broad and deep Internet controls to come, say some analysts.

But inside China, the debate over media censorship continues. Chinese Premier Wen Jiabao's statements [in favor of freedom of speech \(CNN\)](#) in 2010 were [censored within China \(WSJ\)](#), yet ignited a great deal of commentary on China's web. It even prompted retired Communist Party officials to publish a letter [calling for press freedom \(NYT\)](#). But Columbia University professor Andrew Nathan cautioned: "It's impossible to know exactly what Wen means . . . he probably envisions a great deal less reform and a [great deal less human rights \(Guardian\)](#) than we would think such words imply."

Preeti Bhattacharji also contributed reporting for this Background.

Weigh in on this issue by emailing [CFR.org](#).

The Council on Foreign Relations takes no institutional position on policy issues and has no affiliation with the U.S. government. All views expressed in its publications and on its website are the sole responsibility of the author or authors.

Copyright © 2011 by the Council on Foreign Relations, Inc. All rights reserved.