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Changing Media, Changing China

Susan L. Shirk

OVER THE PAST thirty years, the leaders of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) have relinquished their monopoly over the information reaching the public. Beginning in 1979, they allowed newspapers, magazines, and television and radio stations to support themselves by selling advertisements and competing in the marketplace. Then in 1993, they funded the construction of an Internet network. The economic logic of these decisions was obvious: requiring mass media organizations to finance their operations through commercial activities would reduce the government's burden and help modernize China's economy. And the Internet would help catapult the country into the ranks of technologically advanced nations. But less clear is whether China's leaders anticipated the profound political repercussions that would follow.

This collection of essays explores how transformations in the information environment—stimulated by the potent combination of commercial media and Internet—are changing China. The essays are written by Western China experts, as well as by pioneering journalists and experts from China, who write from personal experience about how television, newspapers, magazines, and Web-based news sites navigate the sometimes treacherous crosscurrents

between the market and CCP controls. Although they involve different types of media, the essays share common themes and subjects: the explosion of information made available to the public through market-oriented and Internet-based news sources; how people seek credible information; how the population—better informed than ever before—is making new demands on government; how officials react to these demands; the ambivalence of the leadership as to the benefits and risks of the free flow of information, as well as their instinctive and strenuous efforts to shape public opinion by controlling content; and the ways in which journalists and Netizens are evading and resisting these controls.

Following a brief retrenchment after the Tiananmen crackdown on student demonstrators in June 1989, the commercialization of the mass media picked up steam in the 1990s.¹ Today, newspapers, magazines, television stations, and news Web sites compete fiercely for audiences and advertising revenue. After half a century of being force-fed CCP propaganda and starved of real information about domestic and international events, the Chinese public has a voracious appetite for news.

This appetite is most apparent in the growth of Internet access and the Web,² which have multiplied the amount of information available, the variety of sources, the timeliness of the news, and the national and international reach of the news. China has more than 384 million Internet users, more than any other country, and an astounding 145 million bloggers.³ The most dramatic effect of the Internet is how fast it can spread information, which in turn helps skirt official censorship. Because of its speed, the Internet is the first place news appears; it sets the agenda for other media. Chinese Internet users learn almost instantaneously about events happening overseas and throughout China. Thanks to the major news Web sites that compile articles from thousands of sources, including television, newspapers and magazines, and online publications like blogs, and disseminate them widely, a toxic waste site or corruption scandal in any Chinese city or a politician's speech in Tokyo or Washington becomes headline news across the country. Other complementary technologies, such as cell phones, amplify the impact of the Internet. Millions of people get news bulletins text messaged automatically to their cell phones.

China is nonetheless still a long way from having a free press. As of 2008,

score to China's Internet freedom—78 on a scale from 1 to 100, with 100 being the worst.⁵ The CCP continues to monitor, censor, and manufacture the content of the mass media—including the Web—although at a much higher cost and less thoroughly than before the proliferation of news sources.

During President Hu Jintao's second term, which began in 2007, the party ramped up its efforts to manage this new information environment. What at first looked like temporary measures to prevent destabilizing protests in the lead-up to the 2008 Olympics and during the twentieth anniversary of the Tiananmen crackdown and other political anniversaries in 2009 now seem to have become a permanent strategy. Apparently the CCP will do whatever it takes to make sure that the information reaching the public through the commercial media and the Internet does not inspire people to challenge party rule.

Information management has become a source of serious friction in China's relations with the United States and other Western countries. In 2010, Google, reacting to cyber attacks originating in China and the Chinese government's intensified controls over free speech on the Internet, threatened to pull out of the country unless it was allowed to operate an unfiltered Chinese language search engine.⁶ (Beijing had required Google to filter out material the Chinese government considers politically sensitive as a condition of doing business in China.) Nine days later, Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, in a speech about the Internet and freedom of speech that had been planned before Google's announcement and that did not focus on China or the Google controversy, articulated Internet freedom as an explicit goal of American foreign policy.⁷

The Chinese government was stunned and alarmed by the Google announcement. Google's challenge did not just sully China's international reputation; it also threatened to mobilize a dangerous domestic backlash. A senior propaganda official I interviewed expressed dismay that Google executives had made a high-profile threat instead of using the "good relationship" the Propaganda Department had established with company executives. A Beijing academic heard a senior official say that the government was treating the Google crisis as "the digital version of June 4," referring to the Tiananmen crisis, which almost brought down Communist Party rule in 1989.

of free information. Google has only a 25–30 percent share of the search engine business in China—the Chinese-owned Baidu has been favored by the government and most consumers—but Google is strongly preferred by the members of the highly educated urban elite.⁸ To prevent the controversy from stirring up opposition from this influential group, the Propaganda Department went to work. Overnight, the dominant opinion appearing on the Internet turned 180 degrees against Google and the United States.⁹ The pro-Google messages disappeared and were replaced by accusations against the U.S. government for colluding with Google to subvert Chinese sovereignty through its “information imperialism,” thereby creating suspicions that many of the new postings were bogus. The Propaganda Department asked respected Chinese academics to submit supportive newspaper essays, and provided ghostwriters. Online news portals were required to devote space on their front pages to the government’s counterattacks. To defend itself against the threat of a large-scale movement of Google devotees, the CCP fell back on anti-American nationalism. In March 2010 Google followed through on its threat and moved its search engine to Hong Kong; as a result, the Chinese government and not Google now does the filtering. Despite the unique features of the Google case, international as well as domestic conflicts over censorship are likely to be repeated as the party struggles to shape an increasingly pluralistic information environment.

In her book *Media Control in China*, originally published in 2004 by the international NGO Human Rights in China, journalist He Qinglian lambasts the CCP for its limits on press freedom. She describes Chinese journalists as “dancing in shackles.” Yet she also credits commercialization with “opening a gap in the Chinese government’s control of the news media.”¹⁰ Indeed, the competition for audiences provides a strong motivation for the press to break a news story before the propaganda authorities can implement a ban on reporting it—and it has provided an unprecedented space for protest, as was seen in the initial wave of pro-Google commentary. Caught between commercialization and control, journalists play a cat and mouse game with the censors, a dynamic that is vividly depicted in the case studies in this book.

Even partially relinquishing control of the mass media transforms the

part of the story is the exponential expansion of the amount of information available to the public and how this is changing the political game within China. That change is the subject of this book.

OFFICIAL AMBIVALENCE

As journalist Qian Gang and his coauthor David Bandurski argue in chapter 2, Chinese leaders have a “deep ambivalence” toward the commercial media and the Internet: they recognize its potential benefits as well as its risks. Xiao Qiang, in chapter 9, uses the same term to describe the attitude of Chinese authorities toward the Internet.

By choosing to give up some degree of control over the media, the rulers of authoritarian countries like China make a trade-off. Most obviously, they gain the benefit of economic development; the market operates more efficiently when people have better information. But they also are gambling that they will reap political benefits; that relinquishing control of the media will set off a dynamic that will result in the improvement of the government’s performance and ultimately, they hope, in strengthening its popular support. The media improve governance by providing more accurate information regarding the preferences of the public to policymakers. National leaders also use media as a watchdog to monitor the actions of subordinate officials, particularly at the local level, so they can identify and try to fix problems before they provoke popular unrest. Competition from the commercial media further drives the official media and the government itself to become more transparent; to preserve its credibility, the government must release more information than it ever did before. In all these ways, the transformed media environment improves the responsiveness and transparency of governance. Additionally, a freer press can help earn international approval.

On the other hand, surrendering control over information creates severe political risks. It puts new demands on the government that it may not be able to satisfy, and it could reveal to the public the divisions behind the facade of party unity. Diminished control also provides an opening for political opposition to emerge. What most worries CCP leaders—and what

free-flowing information is not mere paranoia; some comparative social science research indicates that allowing “coordination goods” like press freedom and civil liberties significantly reduces the odds for authoritarian regimes to survive in power.¹¹

What is the connection between information and antigovernment collective action? The more repressive a regime, the more dangerous it is to coordinate and engage in collective action to change that regime. Each individual dares to participate only if the risk of participating is outweighed by the potential benefits. One way to minimize the risk is the anonymity afforded by large numbers. Standing on Tiananmen Square carrying an antiregime sign is an act of political suicide if you are alone. It only makes sense to demonstrate if you know that a crowd will turn out.

Even before the Internet was created, news stories could create focal points for mobilizing mass protests. Cell phones and the Internet are even more useful for coordinating group action as they provide anonymity to the organizers and facilitate two-way communication of many to many. In April 1999, approximately ten thousand devotees of the Falun Gong spiritual sect used cell phones and the Internet to secretly organize a sit-in that surrounded the CCP and government leadership compound in Beijing. A decade before, the fax machine was the communication technology that made it possible for students to organize pro-democracy protests in Beijing’s Tiananmen Square and more than 130 other cities. As the chapters in this book detail, in recent years a combination of newspaper reports, Internet communication tools, and cell phones has enabled student protests against Japan, demonstrations against rural land seizures, and protests against environmentally damaging industrial projects. The political possibilities of the latest social networking technologies like Twitter (a homegrown Chinese version is FanFou), Facebook (a Chinese version is Xiaonei), or the video-sharing program YouTube (a Chinese version is Youku) have yet to be fully tested in China.¹²

As Michael Suk-Young Chwe points out in his book *Rational Ritual*, media communication and other elements of culture make coordination possible by creating “common knowledge” that gives each person the knowledge that others have received the same message.¹³ When all news was communicated through official media, it was used to mobilize support for CCP policies: hence, the CCP had few worries about popular opposition. Thomas Schelling made this point with a characteristically apt analogy: “The participants of a square dance may all be thoroughly dissatisfied with

the particular dances being called, but as long as the caller has the microphone, nobody can dance anything else.”¹⁴ As the number and variety of microphones have increased, so have the force of public opinion and the risk of bottom-up mass action. The CCP propaganda authorities may have been reading Schelling: A June 2009 *People’s Daily* commentary titled “The Microphone Era” says, “In this Internet era, everyone can be an information channel and a principal of opinion expression. A figurative comparison is that everybody now has a microphone in front of him.”¹⁵

Examples like the 2009 antigovernment protests in Iran and the so-called color revolutions in former Soviet states, as well as their own experiences, make Chinese politicians afraid that the free flow of information through the new media could threaten their rule. But it is worth considering the other possibility, namely, that the Internet might actually impede a successful revolutionary movement because venting online is a safer option than taking to the streets; and the decentralized nature of online communication splinters movements instead of integrating them into effective revolutionary organizations.¹⁶ Nevertheless, China’s leaders are too nervous to risk completely ceding control of information.

MASS MEDIA IN TOTALITARIAN CHINA

In the prereform era, China had no journalism as we know it, only propaganda. Highly conscious of public opinion, the CCP devoted a huge amount of resources to managing popular views of all issues.¹⁷ In CCP lingo, the media were called the “throat and tongue” of the party; their sole purpose was to mobilize public support by acting as loudspeakers for CCP policies.¹⁸ The Chinese public received all of its highly homogenous information from a small number of officially controlled sources.

As of 1979, there were only sixty-nine newspapers in the entire country, all run by the party and government.¹⁹ The standard template consisted of photos and headlines glorifying local and national leaders on the front page, and invariably positive reports written in formulaic, ideological prose inside. Local news stories of interest such as fires or crimes were almost never reported. What little foreign news was provided had to be based on the dispatches of the government’s Xinhua News Agency. People read the *People’s Daily* and other official newspapers in the morning at work—offices and factories were required to have subscriptions. The 7 P.M. news on

China Central Television (CCTV) simply rehashed what had been in the *People's Daily*.²⁰ Newspaper editorials and commentaries were read aloud by strident voices over ubiquitous radio loudspeakers and then used as materials for obligatory political study sessions in the workplace.

A steady diet of propaganda depoliticized the public. As political scientist Ithiel de Sola Pool observed, "When regimes impose daily propaganda in large doses, people stop listening."²¹ CCP members, government officials, and politically sophisticated intellectuals, however, had to remain attentive. To get the information they needed to do their jobs—and to survive during the campaigns to criticize individuals who had made ideological mistakes that periodically swept through the bureaucracies—the elite deciphered the coded language of the official media by reading between the lines. Sometimes this esoteric communication was intended as a signal from the top CCP leaders to subordinates about an impending change in the official line.²² Kremlinology and Pekinology developed into a high art not only in foreign intelligence agencies, but also within Soviet and Chinese government circles themselves. In chapter 8, Daniela Stockmann describes survey research that she completed which shows that government officials and people who work with the government continue to read the official press to track policy trends.

A diet consisting solely of official propaganda left people craving trustworthy sources of information.²³ As in all totalitarian states, a wide information gap divided the top leaders from the public. Senior officials enjoyed ample access to the international media and an extensive system of internal intelligence gathered by news organizations and other bureaucracies (called *neican* in Chinese). But the vast majority of the public was left to rely on rumors picked up at the teahouse and personal observations of their neighborhoods and workplaces. (In modern democracies, the information gap between officialdom and the public has disappeared almost entirely: U.S. government officials keep television sets on in their offices and learn about international events first from CNN, not from internal sources.)

MEDIA REFORM

Beginning in the early 1980s, the structure of Chinese media changed. Newspapers, magazines, and television stations received cuts in their gov-

In 1979 they were permitted to sell advertising, and in 1983 they were allowed to retain the profits from the sale of ads. Because people were eager for information and businesses wanted to advertise their products, profits were good and the number of publications grew rapidly. As Qian Gang and David Bandurski note in chapter 2, the commercialization of the media accelerated after 2000 as the government sought to strengthen Chinese media organizations to withstand competition from foreign media companies.

By 2005, China published more than two thousand newspapers and nine thousand magazines.²⁴ In 2003, the CCP eliminated mandatory subscriptions to official newspapers and ended subsidies to all but a few such papers in every province. Even nationally circulated, official papers like *People's Daily*, *Guangming Daily*, and *Economics Daily* are now sold at retail stalls and compete for audiences. According to their editors, *Guangming Daily* sells itself as "a spiritual homeland for intellectuals"; *Economics Daily* markets its timely economic reports; and the *People's Daily* promotes its authoritativeness.²⁵

About a dozen commercial newspapers with national circulations of over 1 million readers are printed in multiple locations throughout the country. The southern province of Guangdong is the headquarters of the cutting-edge commercial media, with three newspaper groups fiercely competing for audiences. Nanjing now has five newspapers competing for the evening readership. People buy the new tabloids and magazines on the newsstands and read them at home in the evening.

Though almost all of these commercial publications are part of media groups led by party or government newspapers, they look and sound completely different. In contrast to the stilted and formulaic language of official publications, the language of the commercial press is lively and colloquial. Because of this difference in style, people are more apt to believe that the content of commercial media is true. Daniela Stockmann's research shows that consumers seek out commercial publications because they consider them more credible than their counterparts from the official media. According to her research, even in Beijing, which has a particularly large proportion of government employees, only about 36 percent of residents read official papers such as the *People's Daily*; the rest read only semiofficial or commercialized papers.

Advertisers and many of the commercial media groups target young and middle-aged urbanites who are well-educated, affluent consumers. But publications also seek to differentiate themselves and appeal to specific