

LIVING SPACE FOR THE CHINESE MEDIA BEFORE AND AFTER THE BEIJING OLYMPICS

A former official reporter turned online commentator examines the risky environment for independent newsgathering, and how citizen reporters manage to open up new information channels.

By Zan Aizong

The Chinese mainland press, circa 2008, is a strange creature: at the same time that there are news blackouts and cover-ups, you also have such counter-control forces as “cross-regional supervision” (*yi di jian du* [异地监督])¹ and online news breakthroughs being nurtured. In the first ten months of this year, China has seen many sudden mass incidents,

during which some brave and outstanding reporters and citizen reporters were at the forefront. At the same time, however, these have been followed by government-led news blackouts where real and fake reporters lined up to get their “shut-up fees.” This seems to illustrate that public opinion is being controlled and that the space for public opinion is still fraught with perils. Reporters pursuing the truth are certain to encounter a series of rapid currents and treacherous sandbanks. Resistance to control has been difficult; yet it has not stopped, and is striving for breakthroughs.

CHINESE NEWS PEOPLE DURING SUDDEN INCIDENTS: BRAVE BUT HELPLESS

Almost all of the sudden incidents that occurred in the first ten months of 2008 were closely linked to the tight control of the media. Governmental news control was “armed to the teeth.” Straight talk was largely absent in the mainstream media, and truth was likewise hard to come by. From the riots in Tibet, earthquake in Wenchuan, and Weng’an riot in Guizhou, to Yang Jia’s assault on police officers in Shanghai² and infants developing kidney stones caused by Sanlu tainted milk powder that went unreported for as long as a month because of the Beijing Olympics—the absence of freedom of expression for the media meant that the official media, from the top down, broadcast a single voice. They were the Party’s mouthpiece, spouting the success

of the Olympics and the success of anti-earthquake measures, and flaunting the “Shenzhou 7” astronauts’ spacewalk.³ There was no freedom of expression whatsoever in the media with Chinese characteristics, and this has led to an absence of truth.

The Constitution stipulates that Chinese citizens have the rights to expression, to exercise supervision, to participation, and to informa-

tion. But these rights can only be tested through their actual practice in the media. Right after the Sichuan earthquake and before the Central Propaganda Department issued its ban, the *Southern Metropolis Daily*, *Southern Weekend*,⁴ and other media with universal values and commercial clout were the first to report from the scene. Oversight by public opinion reflects the popular will, which means that the media, with the aid of the Constitution, found a crack through which to resist news control, but barely survived in that space. But a week later, because the government in the disaster area complained to the Propaganda Department that the Southern News Group should “report the good news and not the bad,” the Propaganda Department ordered Guangdong Province to recall all its reporters. After another week, when the Sichuan local propaganda department was ready with relief measures, the Southern News Group reporters were formally invited back to report from the disaster area, thereby resolving feelings of resentment. Yet Xinhua News Agency, sent by the Central Propaganda Department to sing the praises of the relief work by the people in the disaster area, hardly reported the devastation there, and concealed such facts as the collapse of schools built of tofu dregs [substandard materials].

The Xinhua News Agency reporters had another role to play—to be the eyes and ears of Communist Party of China (CPC) leaders; that is, to turn the inside scoop on school buildings made of “tofu dregs”— which

might easily lead to public protests—into “internal reference” reports for the supreme leaders in Zhongnanhai.⁵ These “internal reference” reports are all secret, as are the written comments by the leaders. Not even the 200 plus members of the Central Committee are necessarily privy to these “internal reference” reports. Since these reports are not public, their impact is zero, and the people are deprived of their right to information. The degree of news freedom is astonishingly similar to that in North Korea.

The State Council’s *Regulations on Reporting Activities in China by Foreign Journalists*, effective from January 1, 2007, to October 17, 2008, ostensibly gave foreign reporters in China the freedom to gather news. This open policy was extended beyond October 17, but in reality foreign reporters entering the Tibet region were required to obtain permits. The explanation given by a Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesperson was that “conditions are not yet mature”⁶ [for foreign journalists to freely report from Tibet], and that “the situation in Tibet [has] not yet stabilize[d]” after “violent activities,” and therefore foreign journalists were required to apply to the regional government for permits.⁷ On the Tibetan issue, mainland media can only run stories issued by the Xinhua News Agency and cannot provide any commentaries on their own authority, a situation that clearly illustrates the great power of the Party mouthpiece. Even as foreign reporters could not report freely from Tibet, neither could the Hong Kong media. Following the “3.14” Incident,⁸ Hong Kong Phoenix TV reporter Sally Wu Xiaoli flew to Lhasa, but before she could get out of the airport, it was arranged, after repeated “urging,” that she would take the next flight out. Not long after, the State Council Information Office gave permission to and arranged for a group of foreign journalists to report from Tibet. But the reporters were followed; this proved that foreign journalists in Tibet were in no way free.

When there is control of the news, there will inevitably be resistance to that control. Chinese Internet users form the ranks of that resistance. For example, the State Council Information Office, which is in charge of the Internet, has formulated all sorts of measures to strengthen control over public opinion by banning online discussion of sensitive incidents. But they failed to prevent the breakthroughs achieved by netizens. Following the Weng’an riots in Guizhou, citizen reporters’ desire to be heard on the Internet was intense. Citizen reporter Zhou Shuguang flew to the scene, thanks to an air ticket funded by netizens, and slipped through the armed police blockade to report from the scene using a cell phone that could upload information and photographs onto the Internet. His level of professionalism was on a par with that of regular media reporters. The “citizen reporter” is a nascent force in the resistance to media control.

**A PRESS WARPED DURING THE OLYMPICS:
HOW IT STANDS NOW**

The Beijing Olympics were a “political coronation” that gilded the facade of the CPC and the Chinese government. The slogan used by the CPC—“utilizing the efforts of the entire nation to successfully host the Olympics”—permitted only success, not failure. All

sorts of important events had to make way for the Olympics. Even the trial of Yang Jia, charged with intentional homicide, which was scheduled to open on July 29 in a Shanghai court, was suddenly postponed until after the Olympics. As for the press circle, during the Olympics, they could report the “good news,” not the “bad news,” so as to give the green light all the way to creating “a

good atmosphere for public opinion” during the Olympics. Sanlu milk powder containing melamine was already known to be toxic and “questionable” in



A resident takes pictures of a building destroyed after a rain-triggered mudslide in Xiangfen county, Shanxi Province, September 11, 2008. Photo credit: Aly Song/REUTERS

August. But this fact was concealed for a month because of the Olympics, and not until September 11 did the Shanghai-based *Oriental Morning Post* reporter, Jian Guangzhou, expose the story and name names, after which sales of the product were banned nationwide.⁹ Of Sanlu's infant victims, 2,390 infected children were still being treated in the hospital at the end of October. In addition, during the Olympics, the dairy products of Yili,¹⁰ a designated supplier for the Games, were found to be unsafe, and were rejected. They were replaced by Beijing's Sanyuan milk. But the Olympic Committee did not explain this fact to the news media. News of another case of contamination of dumplings was completely embargoed as well. In September, maggots were found in tangerines in Ya'an, Sichuan Province. But this was not made public until a month later. This shows that the local government and the Central Propaganda Department have the same "mode of thinking": their first response to sudden incidents is to cover up and conceal; when they can no longer conceal, they exaggerate the government emergency measures. Thus the leaders benefit and the negative impact is reduced. Blame is shifted onto the "incompetence" of certain departments, etc. Then they wait for big matters to become small and small ones to disappear altogether.

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Recently, we have seen that were it not for the hot pursuit of public opinion reflected in the media and by millions and millions of netizens, the case of the

Shaanxi Forestry Department using the paper "South China tiger" to defraud the State Forestry Administration of its special funds would have come to nothing.¹¹ But the yet unsettled Sanlu tainted milk powder inci-

dent already seems to have petered out. The Ministry of Justice is not allowing lawyers to become involved in cases seeking compensation for the victims, and the courts, using the excuse that the "government has not yet formulated a compensation plan," are "not accepting" the victims' complaints. It was not only the media in Hebei Province¹² that could not issue reports or commentary on their own authority regarding the origins of the Sanlu scandal and inside-story of its cover-up. Even the national media was similarly "cooled down." Meanwhile, Sanlu simply changed its name and resumed production. On September 18, an exclusive investigation into Sanlu that was to run in *Southern Weekend* was killed. The magazine instead had to carry the Xinhua News

Agency report, "Memorandum on the Sanlu Milk Powder Incident." Thus, the Central Propaganda Department let the *Southern Weekend* make its so-called "contribution to stability and unity." Without the supervision of independent public opinion, the only outcome of the Central Propaganda Department's taming of the media is political achievement, not truth. Reporters remain the targets of the government's demands to "shut up."

CROSS-REGIONAL SUPERVISION IS LIMITED TO THAT OF "WATCHING THE FIRE FROM ACROSS THE WATER"

Cross-regional supervision is a unique model of supervision by public opinion in China: it is like "watching a fire from across the water." I have a metaphor for it:



A security guard stops a photographer from taking pictures of the China Central Television (CCTV) headquarters during a media tour in Beijing on July 30, 2008. Photo credit: Claro Cortes IV/REUTERS

“For news about local scandals, subscribe to a newspaper from another province; for news about scandals elsewhere, subscribe to a local newspaper.” For example, the Guangdong media can exercise supervision on the national level, as long as it doesn’t touch anything in Guangdong. Take the Sichuan earthquake, for example: you couldn’t expect much from the Sichuan media. But Sichuan reporters could serve as good “informants” for reporters from elsewhere, and as their “assistants” and “guides.” This was the way that school building after school building constructed from tofu dregs was exposed. The Central Propaganda Department’s ban on cross-regional supervision was largely a failure, or was beset with violators. The first breakthrough of a market-oriented media was to neutralize “party-orientation;” so long as they do not openly criticize the Communist Party system, the media can be straight-talking and strive to break down limits, reporting on specific cases. The living space for media can expand through competition.

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But there have also been examples of the failure of cross-regional supervision. The withdrawal of Southern News Group reporters from the earthquake zone is not the first example. The three-month suspension (from September to December) of *Caijing*, an Inner-Mongolian paper in Beijing, because it was exercising cross-regional supervision, would not be the last. Though the bans issued by the Central Propaganda Department and propaganda departments at all levels are not as effective as they once were, “a camel starved to death is still bigger than a horse” (*shou si di luo tuo bi ma da* [瘦死的骆驼比马大]), and some media in places without any economic clout can easily be “corrected” by the Central Propaganda Department. The cover-up of the mine accident in Huozhou, Shanxi Province, is an example. Many reporters got the “shut-up fees.” The Central Propaganda Department and the General Administration of Press and Publication issued a news ban and sus-

pending some local publications, finally naming only six “unscrupulous media outlets.” The *West Times*’ reporter Dai Xiaojun challenged this, producing pictures to show that at least 100 reporters received “shut-up fees.” Though the Press and Publication Administration at first refused to acknowledge this, thus controlling public opinion, it finally admitted that it had indeed given hush money to reporters.¹³ In 2005, *Henan Business Daily* was suspended for a month for reporting that real reporters and fake ones had both received “shut-up fees” for concealing the truth about fatalities in another mine accident. In May 2008, the *New Travel Weekly* in Chongqing was ordered to stop publication—until it could “clearly admit and correct its errors”—because the authorities thought its use of models in a shoot to recreate the blood-splattered scenes of the Sichuan earthquake site was “disrespectful.”

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During the Olympics, mainland press circles were all filled with praises and cheers; when the Games ended, the media’s reporting of sudden incidents was strictly limited to discussions of facts; exposing corruption and other disgraceful acts was still very difficult. The mainstream media praised political achievements and covered up lapses of government and its complete disregard for human life. China has no legal guarantee of press freedom; the government exercises firm control over the media. The regulation for strengthening news-reporting activities unveiled by the government in fact became an “imperial sword” to constrain them. It is precisely the Central Propaganda Department and powerful local government departments that are responsible for cover ups and news blackouts, as they interfere in the lawful reporting activities of news organizations and news and editorial staff. The result is that whenever a mass incident occurs, you will almost always see interference with and bribing of reporters, and obstruction of their activities. News blackouts and cover ups are even more prevalent.

The General Administration of Press and Publication exercises a monopoly on the reporter's rights to prove, investigate, and publicize through publishing and news agencies or the broadcast and television media. That is, the special rights possessed by the media and news reporters to know, to interview, to publish, to critique, to supervise, etc., are all controlled by the government. Under these circumstances, truth and facts cannot be disseminated, and the resistance of government control and cover ups grows inevitably more difficult. At present, the only breakthrough—namely, countering control—depends on cross-regional supervision, which is itself limited. But once a certain momentum is created to push for legislation on press freedom and for privately-owned newspapers, and to call for an end to the Party's ban of private newspapers, there is a possibility of building a civil society and achieving freedom of the press. And though this step is rather difficult, it has to be taken.

Translated by J. Latourelle

Notes

1. This phrase is now commonly used to describe the ability of the press to scrutinize events in other localities but not its own.
2. Yang Jia, a 28-year-old unemployed Beijing resident, was arrested in October 2007 in Shanghai for riding an unlicensed bicycle. He later testified in court that he was insulted by the police during interrogation. According to the Chinese media, on July 1, 2008, Yang attacked the police headquarters in Zhabei, a Shanghai suburb, and killed six policemen. Yang was executed on November 26, 2008.
3. Shenzhou 7 (*shenzhou qihao* [神舟七号]) was the third human spaceflight mission of the Chinese space program. The craft was launched on September 25, 2008, and returned to earth three days later, on September 28.
4. The *Southern Metropolis Daily* and *Southern Weekend* are sister publications based in Guangdong Province.
5. Zhongnanhai is the residential compound near the Forbidden City in Beijing that houses the highest-level CPC leaders.
6. Jiang Yu, spokesperson, Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs, April 15, 2008.
7. Liu Jianchao, spokesperson, Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs, June 26, 2008.
8. March 14, 2008, the first day of the 2008 unrest in Tibet.
9. "Uproar Over China Milk Scandal," *Radio Free Asia*, September 23, 2008, <http://www.rfa.org/english/news/china/milk-09232008075809.html>.
10. The Inner Mongolia Yili Industrial Group, a leading producer of dairy products, was a sponsor of the Olympics.
11. In October 2007, the Shaanxi Provincial Forestry Department held a press conference showing photographs of a "South China tiger" believed to be extinct. The photographs were later proven to have been fabricated by a farmer, who received a reward of 20,000 *yuan* (US \$2,915) from the State Forestry Administration. Internet users accused the Shaanxi Provincial Forestry Department of approving the photographs in order to boost tourism.
12. Sanlu is headquartered in Hebei Province.
13. "Xin wen chu ban zong shu tong bao 'feng kou fei' shi jian chu li jie guo" [新闻出版总署通报“封口费”事件处理结果], CCTV.com, November 27, 2008, <http://news.cctv.com/china/20081127/100789.shtml>.