

CHAPTER 5

CHINA'S MEDIA AND INFORMATION CONTROL

Key Findings

- China's economic reforms have not led to fundamental changes in its policy of controlling the flow of information. China's Internet filtering system is the most sophisticated in the world and uses numerous techniques to minimize Chinese citizens' exposure to topics the Chinese Communist Party sees as threatening to its rule, including official corruption, freedom, and democracy, or to its standards of decency. In addition to technical controls, China discourages free expression by encouraging collective responsibility and self-censorship, reinforced by occasional high-profile incarcerations. China reportedly has as many as thirty thousand individuals whose job it is to police the Internet.
- The Chinese government encourages nationalist sentiment in the news media and online. Anti-U.S., anti-Japanese, and anti-democratic views are rarely censored while anti-government sentiments are heavily monitored and removed as soon as they are spotted by the government Internet police.
- Some U.S. firms that wish to establish, maintain, or expand their presence in the Chinese market have assisted the government in its effort to control speech and have assisted in official actions against Internet users.

Overview

The Chinese government's extensive and persistent controls over the flow of information in the media and over the Internet pose an ongoing security concern for the United States. Through these controls, China's government plays a commanding role in the formation of public opinion about the United States and U.S. policies, which can in turn undermine U.S. diplomatic efforts. These practices also risk creating an environment prone to misunderstanding and miscalculation in the bilateral relationship, particularly during times of crisis.

China's Internet filtering system has grown markedly in size and sophistication over the last two years and is currently the most sophisticated Internet control system in the world. Search techniques that precisely target prohibited content but entail little blocking of similar but less sensitive materials make the Chinese system more effective but less obvious to the casual Internet user. In addition, the Chinese authorities' focus on Chinese language content rather than content in English or other foreign languages draws less attention from foreign critics but does not appreciably dilute the effectiveness of the censorship.

China's control of information media exacerbates and perpetuates a xenophobic—and at times particularly anti-American—Chinese nationalism. The Commission remains concerned about the long-term effects of these practices on a new generation of Chinese citizens who have been persistently subjected to a highly controlled and manipulated information environment.

The Commission held a hearing on April 14, 2005 to address the mechanisms and methods used by China's government to control information, including the Internet and news media. The hearing particularly sought to understand how government control and influence affects Chinese popular opinion of the United States and its policies.

The Commission also used the opportunity to publicly release and hear testimony about a report from the OpenNet Initiative (ONI)¹ titled "Internet Filtering in China in 2004–2005: A Country Study." The report maps China's system of multiple control points and notes the adaptability of the system in response to efforts to circumvent controls. It further documents the opaque nature of China's Internet control system. Guiding laws and regulations are vague in defining prohibited content, and citizens have no opportunity to view which sites are blocked or method for appealing the decision to block a site. ONI concludes that "China's legal and technological systems combine to form a broad, potent, and effective means of controlling the information that Chinese users can see and share on the Internet."²

China's Information Control Mechanisms

China remains adept at controlling information flows within the country, which affects U.S. interests by influencing public opinion about the United States and its policies. Chinese information control can affect the United States in other ways as well, such as by exacerbating global public health threats. Despite international criticism over the suppression of information during the 2002–2003 SARS crisis, the Chinese government continues to filter news on infectious diseases. China's state-run press denounced the research of Dr. Guan Yi, a leading investigator of avian flu, and the government limited his ongoing research of this potential global pandemic.³

Internet

China's Internet population has continued its exponential growth, reaching 103 million by June 2005.⁴ In October 2004, Premier Wen Jiabao announced a strategy for using the Internet and information resources to continue or accelerate the country's economic modernization, formalizing what was already the government's practice.⁵ But partly because other media for expressing discontent or gathering information are more heavily and effectively policed, the Internet remains a key medium for information exchanges that challenge government policies and control. China's government therefore has sustained its efforts to control the Internet, citing such concerns as state security, public decency, and youth health. China's basic strategy of using the Internet to modernize the economy while retaining political control of its use has not changed.

China's government uses several techniques to minimize Chinese citizens' exposure to topics the Chinese Communist Party sees as threatening to its rule or as indecent. These include hard techniques such as routers that disrupt user attempts to access sensitive Web sites, software that detects sensitive key words and prevents user connections to these sources, and programs that block Internet discussion board and chat room postings.⁶ Soft methods are also employed, including burdensome licensing requirements for Internet cafes and harsh but selective enforcement that prompts self-censorship among users.⁷

In September 2005, China updated its regulations for Internet news with a proclamation that largely reiterated existing and vaguely worded prohibitions on such acts as creating social uncertainty, endangering the unification of the country, promoting superstition, or harming the country's reputation. Two new rules banned use of the Internet to organize illegal activities or protests.⁸

China is said to have the largest prison population of cyberdissidents in the world. As of June 2004, there were 61 cyberdissidents in jail for criticizing the Chinese government.⁹ Amnesty International's latest annual report documented more than 50 people who had been detained or imprisoned for Internet activities.¹⁰ According to another report, 13 Internet essayists were tried, sentenced, and denied appeals between October and December of 2003 alone.¹¹ China set the stage for future criminal treatment of Internet users by requiring all domestic Web sites to register with authorities by June 30, 2005, closing those that did not comply.¹²

News Media

There have been both surface improvements and negative developments regarding media freedom in China, but it would be misleading to view them as indicative of any fundamental change in the disposition of China's government toward the more open flow of information. In October 2004, a Chinese court ruled against a libel claim by a state-owned enterprise. The defending magazine was cleared on the grounds that it had used plausible sources. Several prominent journalists were released in November 2004, leading some to hope this was an indicator that the government was allowing journalists more leeway—an expectation that has since proven hollow. Criticism of certain government officials and policies was also permitted before Hu Jintao fully consolidated power, as a function of intra-Party political struggles.

Offsetting these positive developments, the Committee to Protect Journalists reports that 42 journalists were in Chinese jails at the end of 2004. Reporters Without Borders tallies 27 journalists in prison, more than in any other country. A sample of prominent developments includes the October 2005 closure of an online news and discussion site following its reports of protests in the village of Taishi over corruption accusations.¹³ In December 2004, several prominent magazine editors lost their jobs after printing stories critical of the government.¹⁴ And in July 2005, a journalist received a ten-year sentence for posting on the Internet a copy of a government letter to newspapers advising them that the return of Tiananmen dissidents would be a socially destabilizing force.¹⁵

Overall, the environment for news media in China has not appreciably changed with regard to government control. Journalists and news organizations remain at risk of political or economic reprisal as well as criminal charges. Journalists and editors continue to respond to this environment by self-censoring their work.

China's news media, particularly newspapers, have become more market oriented, even as political controls remain in force. In July 2003, China reduced the state-run media presence, shutting down many state-owned local newspapers and eliminating mandatory subscriptions for peasants and government officials. The major state-owned news sources were maintained, while private media outlets expanded dramatically in number.¹⁶

Journalists face expanding market pressures to report on subjects of interest to their readers, which has led to an increasing danger from non-government sources. The government has failed to protect journalists from these threats, and may be complicit in some of them. For example, a journalist had two fingers cut off in response to his investigative reporting.¹⁷ In the absence of a strong rule of law, and given the government's hostile disposition regarding journalists, increases in reporting on corruption, criminal activity, and misconduct of local businesses have made journalists targets of physical attacks. The number of these incidents has risen in the past two years.¹⁸

Effect on U.S. Interests

Government Control of Chinese Public Opinion

China's technical ability to promote or suppress information gives the government strong influence over public opinion. The Chinese government can trumpet its opinion through a variety of transparent and disguised outlets while suppressing alternative opinions or facts contrary to the government line. By doing so, the government can induce public protests against foreign countries and their policies. The government also has the influence to disperse such ongoing protests or head off potential protests by changing the flow of information, particularly in coordination with police action. At times, it exercises both of these options on the same issue, fanning public discontent with a foreign country, then quieting the protests before they become unruly.

With government support and acquiescence, the Internet is used in China to express and concentrate nationalist sentiment. Chinese Web sites, for example, collected 22 million signatures petitioning against Japan's effort to gain a seat on the U.N. Security Council.¹⁹ Comments on these sites criticized China's government for not taking a stance against Japan's bid. The Internet was also used to organize recent protests at the Japanese Embassy.²⁰

Selective censorship is partially responsible for the prevalence of nationalism on the Internet. China's government also engenders nationalism by employing unidentified commentators who promote the government line in Internet discussions.²¹ Yet Internet nationalism is often more vociferous than the official government line and sometimes goes so far as to criticize China's government for softness in response to foreign aggression or impropriety. During anti-Japanese protests in China in April and May of 2005, tens of millions of Chinese cell phone users received a text message from the

government. The message urged citizens to “[e]xpress patriotism rationally. Don’t take part in illegal protests. Don’t make trouble.”²² This incident demonstrates in a startling manner the will and ability of the government to actively mold public opinion—even though the government message in this case was a calming one. The government’s ability to control information has expanded dramatically, and with it the government’s ability to manipulate public opinion.

Setting the Context for Future Tensions

China’s nationalism is concentrated on perceptions of Taiwan, Japan, and the United States.²³ An aversion to U.S. policies considered hegemonic and imperialist flows naturally from early communist descriptions of Western powers as plundering empires, and from later assertions by China that the Soviet Union and the United States were unjustly attempting to control and subjugate other countries. Given China’s strong emphasis on economic growth, contemporary nationalism often paints U.S. actions as intentional impediments to China’s development—for instance, claiming that the U.S. interest in human rights and environmentalism is solely an oblique attempt to constrain or deny China’s growth.

Chinese propaganda additionally targets democracy in concept and in practice.²⁴ Democratic nations and democratic events such as elections are portrayed as promoting chaos and exacerbating internal societal fissures. This directly contradicts the U.S. strategy of encouraging democracy and freedom worldwide, which is formulated as both a normative and strategic goal.²⁵

China’s government undoubtedly plays a heavy role in establishing and propagating the nationalist narrative, but it does not have total control over the growth and direction of nationalist sentiments. China’s encouragement of anti-U.S. nationalism limits the effectiveness of U.S. public diplomacy and other efforts in the region. It also enhances the risks of misperception and miscalculation in the bilateral relationship, particularly during potential crisis situations.

U.S. Response

Radio Free Asia and Voice of America

The United States continues to provide uncensored news to Chinese citizens through Radio Free Asia (RFA) and Voice of America (VOA). These services are disseminated to their Chinese audiences via radio stations and Web sites. China continues to jam RFA and VOA radio signals and block RFA and VOA Web sites. China’s jamming clearly violates accepted international agreements, and contributes to the government’s ability to manipulate public opinion.²⁶

Internet Anti-Censorship Program

The Commission in the past has advocated the establishment of a government program to counteract China’s Internet censorship. The Broadcasting Board of Governors’ (BBG) Internet anti-censorship program addresses this recommendation. In fiscal year 2004, \$1 million was appropriated to the BBG to assist its efforts to allow Chinese Internet users to circumvent China’s Internet controls and

receive uncensored news information.²⁷ In FY 2005, \$1 million again was appropriated for the program.

The BBG submitted a spending report in April 2004 indicating that it intended to use the bulk of the money to fund Chinese-language email distribution programs which provide news, features, and directions to often-changing proxy Web sites to Internet users in China. Proxy sites allow users to navigate the Internet without being blocked by China's government censorship controls. Preliminary work was also begun on efforts to use text messaging as a way to deliver news and other information to interested users inside China, mapping the physical system underlying China's Internet firewall, and exploring how volunteers outside China might help Chinese users access more information and mask the source of that information.²⁸

The Commission believes that the BBG's program has been effective in providing Chinese Internet users with access to otherwise unavailable information. Moreover, the program is scalable and could magnify its effect if supported with increased resources.

In addition to increases in scale, the U.S. Internet anti-censorship program could become more effective through increased sophistication. In 2004, the OpenNet Initiative conducted research on the BBG program to provide Internet users in both Iran and China the opportunity to access the Internet without censorship from those governments. The United States employed filters to prevent access to adult content. However, these filters were poorly designed, which had the inadvertent effect of blocking thousands of useful and non-controversial sites such as sites for the U.S. embassy, a presidential election campaign, and a popular email service.²⁹ ONI concluded that the United States was over-blocking in its own effort to control what Iranian and Chinese users could view.

Global Internet Freedom Office

While the BBG Internet anti-censorship program has been successful, the Commission believes that a more robust and integrated strategy by the U.S. government is needed. The Commission continues to support the establishment of an executive branch office dedicated to monitoring the status of foreign government Internet censorship efforts and to developing and deploying Internet anti-censorship technology to counter foreign jamming and censorship.

Responsible Corporate Involvement

U.S. companies continue to play an active role in China's Internet censorship, providing hardware, software, and content filtering services. While these interactions between U.S. corporations and China's government may be legitimate commercial decisions, in sum they had the effect of helping to build and legitimize the government's media censorship efforts.

Even outside direct relationships with China's government, the policies of Western companies may affect Chinese Internet users. Yahoo signed a voluntary code of conduct, obliging it to prevent Chinese Internet users from expressing anti-government sentiments.³⁰ It followed through on this pledge by helping the government locate and imprison a journalist for sending a private email

to a pro-democracy Web site.³¹ A senior executive justified this action by noting, "I do not like the outcome of what happens with these things. ... But we have to follow the law."³² Microsoft launched a new Chinese language Web log service that prohibits the use of terms such as "democracy," "freedom," and "human rights" in certain sections.³³ Google has decided to display in its Chinese-language news searches only those results that are accessible to Chinese users, stimulating a discussion about the relative values of self-censorship and good service. Google argues that its users would be poorly served by a display of news sites that they could not access.³⁴ Additionally, Google has acquired a non-controlling share of a Chinese Internet service provider that filters user activities, while Yahoo has launched its own.³⁵

The U.S. government has articulated a desire for freedom of information in China and worldwide, and implemented a BBG program to obstruct Chinese government filtration of Internet content. At the same time, U.S. companies have provided hardware for China's system of control, and made operating decisions that conform to the preference of China's government for censorship on the Internet.