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Lawrence Liu

Senior Counsel, Congressional-Executive Commission on China

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China’s Media and Information Controls – The Impact in China and the United States

Thank you Chairman Bartholomew and Members of the Commission for inviting me to testify and the Commission staff for putting together this panel. I work for the Congressional-Executive Commission on China, which monitors human rights and rule of law in China. I am responsible for the Commission’s reporting on media freedom. This year, the Congressional-Executive Commission on China has found that Chinese authorities continue to control the media to their advantage. The June 12 Iranian presidential election is a case in point and that is what I will focus on today.

During the first week after the Iran election, Chinese media coverage was extensive.<sup>1</sup> Media from the top down were all reporting on it.<sup>2</sup> Newspapers, Web sites, and TV programs showed graphic images of the protests.<sup>3</sup> There was less coverage of the protests relative to other election news and little discussion of the political implications of the election for China.<sup>4</sup> But the coverage appeared relatively neutral in tone and not highly politicized.

This started to change a week after the election. First, propaganda authorities reportedly ordered Chinese media to pull back coverage of the protests. Only reports from major media outlets were allowed. Web sites deleted comments that did not conform to the official line.<sup>5</sup>

Then, prompted by developments on the ground, central media began to issue editorials attacking the “West.” By central media, I refer to outlets such as Xinhua, People’s Daily, Guangming Daily, and Global Times, all of which are under the control of the central government or Communist Party. What did these editorials in central media claim?

First, Chinese central media<sup>6</sup> claimed that the “West” was using Twitter to interfere in Iran’s “internal affairs.” Here, Chinese central media cited the U.S. State Department’s request of Twitter, that Twitter delay scheduled maintenance so that Iranians could continue using Twitter to share information.<sup>7</sup>

Second, Chinese central media claimed that the “Western” media were serving the interests of “Western” governments. Chinese central media said “Western” media were manufacturing unrest in Iran. Chinese central media claimed Voice of America and BBC were “Western” government mouthpieces bent on dividing Iran.<sup>8</sup> Chinese central media claimed the American media, following the U.S. government’s lead, focused too much attention on Twitter and Facebook.<sup>9</sup> In a word, Chinese central media said the “Western” media were “biased.”

Third, Chinese central media sought to paint Twitter and other online tools in a negative light. Chinese central media said Twitter had been used to spread false information. They

said it was undemocratic since most Iranians who were using Twitter at the time were opposition supporters.<sup>10</sup>

Finally, Chinese central media claimed that tough statements by “Western” leaders amounted to interference. They cited President Obama’s “the world is watching” statement, U.S. Congressional resolutions condemning Iran’s response to the protests, and statements from British and Israeli leaders.<sup>11</sup>

That being said, Chinese media were not monolithic in their coverage and not all commentary about the United States and the “West” was as heated. However, the more pronounced views I’ve just described were transmitted through central media outlets, meaning we can safely assume they were vetted at high levels.

There are a couple of takeaways I would like to leave you with:

First, when Chinese officials need to, they still can effectively shape coverage in their favor. They can issue broad restrictions, while using the central media to promote the official view. They remove dissenting views from the Internet. We have seen this following unrest in Tibet and Xinjiang and we saw this in the case of the Iran election. It’s important to keep in mind, however, that Chinese media and citizens continue to test the boundaries of China’s censorship.

Second, in this case, Chinese central media selectively used what they perceived the “West” was doing in Iran to bolster the Chinese government’s official view on both the “Internet” and the “West.”

Chinese officials remain wary of the Internet’s perceived potential for disruption. They blocked access to Twitter, Fanfou (a domestic version of Twitter), and YouTube during the 20th anniversary of the Tiananmen protests and following recent unrest in Xinjiang.<sup>12</sup> They continue to subject audio and video sharing Web sites to increased regulation and scrutiny.<sup>13</sup> The Iran election allowed them to argue that Twitter and similar sites are forces for instability.

Chinese officials also believe that the “West” dominates international opinion through its media and that China should counter this monopoly by enhancing China’s own media abroad.<sup>14</sup> The Iran election gave officials another opportunity to attempt to discredit the “Western” press as a biased and destabilizing force of governments bent on interfering in others’ affairs.

In sum, while the regular Chinese news reports appeared open at first, Chinese control over the media kicked in when developments on the ground played into central authorities’ broader arguments about “Western” interference.

The Congressional-Executive Commission on China is releasing its 2009 Annual Report in October. This report will contain more extensive coverage of these and related topics and I encourage you to read it on our Web site soon.

Thank you.

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<sup>1</sup> Bo Gu, “Iran Protests Make Headlines in China, Too,” NBC News (Online), 19 June 09.

<sup>2</sup> “Shift in Authoritative PRC Media Commentary on Iran Election Suggests Concern Over Potential Impact of Social Media,” Open Source Center, 10 July 09, 3.

<sup>3</sup> Bo Gu, “Iran Protests Make Headlines in China, Too,” NBC News (Online), 19 June 09. See also Sina.com special page on Iranian election and aftermath at <http://news.sina.com.cn/z/2009Irandx/index.shtml>.

<sup>4</sup> Bo Gu, “Iran Protests Make Headlines in China, Too,” NBC News (Online), 19 June 09; “Shift in Authoritative PRC Media Commentary on Iran Election Suggests Concern Over Potential Impact of Social Media,” Open Source Center, 10 July 09, 3.

<sup>5</sup> “China Restricts Reporting on Internet Filtering Plan, Iran Protests, Other Topics,” CECC China Human Rights and Rule of Law Update, No. 4, 2009, 2, citing Fiona Tam and Kristine Kwok, “Media Told To Play Down Coverage of Iran Protests,” South China Morning Post (Online), 20 June 09.

<sup>6</sup> My use of Chinese central media in the context of this discussion refers to one or more editorials published in Xinhua, Guangming Daily, People’s Daily, and other authoritative, central media outlets under the close control of the Chinese government or Communist Party.

<sup>7</sup> Pan Zhi, “‘Twitter Revolution’ Not A Model for the ‘E-Era’” [“Twitter geming” bu gai shi “e shidai” de bangyang], Xinhua (Online), 26 June 09; Wen Xian, “People’s Daily International Forum: Emphasis on ‘Electronic Diplomacy’ and Lifeless ‘No Interference’ Declaration” [Renmin ribao guoji luntan: qiangshi “dianzi waijiao” yu cangbai de “bu ganshe” biaotai], People’s Daily (Online), 25 June 09.

<sup>8</sup> Li Jiabin, “‘Western Factors’ Behind Iran’s Election Crisis” [Yilang xuanju weiji beihou de “xifang yinsu”], Guangming Daily (Online), 24 June 09.

<sup>9</sup> Wen Xian, “People’s Daily International Forum: Emphasis on ‘Electronic Diplomacy’ and Lifeless ‘No Interference’ Declaration” [Renmin ribao guoji luntan: qiangshi “dianzi waijiao” yu cangbai de “bu ganshe” biaotai], People’s Daily (Online), 25 June 09.

<sup>10</sup> Yang Liqun, “What Allowed the Social Networking Web Site Twitter To Become A Vehicle for the Iran Election Crisis?” [Shi shenme rang shejiao wangzhan Twitter chengwei yilang xuanju fengbo de meijie?], Liberation Daily, reprinted in People’s Daily (Online), 23 June 09.

<sup>11</sup> Li Jiabin, “‘Western Factors’ Behind Iran’s Election Crisis” [Yilang xuanju weiji beihou de “xifang yinsu”], Guangming Daily (Online), 24 June 09.

<sup>12</sup> Peter Foster, “China Begins Internet ‘Blackout’ Ahead of Tiananmen Anniversary,” Telegraph (Online), 2 June 09; D’Arcy Doran, “Savvy Internet Users Defy China’s Censors on Riot,” Agence France-Presse (Online), 6 July 09; Fiona Tam, “Censorship Issue Settled as Authorities Silence Booming Mainland Twitter Clone,” South China Morning Post (Online), 20 July 09.

<sup>13</sup> See, e.g., SARFT Circular Regarding Strengthening Content Management of Internet Video and Audio Programming, [Guangdian zongju guanyu jiaqiang hulianwang shiting jiemu neirong guanli de tongzhi], issued 30 March 09, art. 1.

<sup>14</sup> “Hu Jintao Speech Stresses Media’s Role To Serve Party,” Congressional-Executive Commission on China (Online), 15 August 08, citing “Speech by Hu Jintao Delivered While Inspecting the Work of Renmin Ribao” [Zai renmin ribao she kaocha gongzuo shi de jianghua], People’s Daily (Online), 21 June 08; Vivian Wu and Adam Chen, “Beijing in 45b Yuan Global Media Drive,” South China Morning Post (Online), 13 January 09.

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