

The Long Shadow of Chinese Censorship:

How the Communist Party's Media Restrictions Affect News Outlets Around the World

A Report to the Center for International Media Assistance

By Sarah Cook

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**National Endowment
for Democracy**
Supporting freedom around the world

The Center for International Media Assistance (CIMA), at the National Endowment for Democracy, works to strengthen the support, raise the visibility, and improve the effectiveness of independent media development throughout the world. The Center provides information, builds networks, conducts research, and highlights the indispensable role independent media play in the creation and development of sustainable democracies. An important aspect of CIMA's work is to research ways to attract additional U.S. private sector interest in and support for international media development.

CIMA convenes working groups, discussions, and panels on a variety of topics in the field of media development and assistance. The center also issues reports and recommendations based on working group discussions and other investigations. These reports aim to provide policymakers, as well as donors and practitioners, with ideas for bolstering the effectiveness of media assistance.

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Preface

The Center for International Media Assistance (CIMA) at the National Endowment for Democracy commissioned this study. We hope its findings contribute to better-informed initiatives for expanding freedom of information within China, nurturing independent Chinese-language media outside the country, and supporting quality international reporting on the world's most populous nation.

CIMA is grateful to Sarah Cook, an analyst of Chinese media, for her research and insights on this topic.



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Executive Summary

China's ambassador to the United States urges Bloomberg's chief editor to withhold a story about Communist Party leader Xi Jinping. A French satellite company cuts the signal of an overseas Chinese television station to "show a good gesture to the Chinese government." A Taiwanese talk show host resigns after station executives try to stop his program from touching on topics sensitive to Beijing. And in Hanoi, a Vietnamese man sits in prison for broadcasting uncensored radio programming to China.

These are a small sample of incidents that have occurred over the past five years and are discussed in this report. Collectively, they illustrate the various ways in which Chinese Communist Party (CCP) information controls extend beyond mainland China's borders.

This study provides a survey of this phenomenon and its recent evolution as it pertains to the news media sector, though similar dynamics also affect the film, literature, and performing arts industries. Specifically, this report focuses on six types of media outlets based outside mainland China that together reach news consumers in dozens of countries: major international media; local outlets in Asia, Africa, and Latin America; mainstream media in Hong Kong and Taiwan; exile Chinese outlets providing uncensored news to people in China; and media serving Chinese diaspora communities around the world.¹

In many cases, Chinese officials directly impede independent reporting by media based abroad. However, more prevalent—and often more effective—are methods of control that subtly induce self-censorship or inspire media owners, advertisers, and other international actors to take action on the CCP's behalf. The interviews and incidents analyzed in this study suggest a systematic effort to signal to commercial partners and media owners that their operations in China and access to Chinese citizens will be jeopardized if they assist, do business with, or refrain from censoring voices the CCP has designated as politically undesirable.

These efforts—ranging from discreet to blatant—are successful in some cases, and encounter significant pushback in others, with journalists and activists at times scoring important victories. But whatever the outcome of each contestation, the "China Factor" is palpably present, be it at the internationally renowned *Washington Post*, a local newspaper in Nepal, or a Chinese radio talk show in Los Angeles.

The Chinese authorities' transnational media controls manifest themselves differently in different environments. Within China, local officials, security forces, and regulators forcibly prevent foreign correspondents from accessing sensitive locations or interviewees, intimidate their Chinese assistants, and block websites. Outside

China, diplomats urge senior executives to alter content, compel businesses to refrain from advertising in disfavored Chinese-language media, and in extreme cases, pressure other governments to suppress CCP critics.

More subtly, a number of political and economic incentives lead media owners and journalists to avoid topics likely to incur the CCP's ire, especially commentary that challenges the legitimacy of one-party rule or reports that touch "hot button" issues such as the plight of Tibetans, Uighurs, and Falun Gong practitioners.

Over the past five years, many of these dynamics have intensified in scope and nature. Physical assaults against foreign reporters in China have become more violent. Chinese government alliances with media owners have spread from Hong Kong to Taiwan. And major Western news outlets have found themselves facing the kinds of restrictions—including wholesale website blocking and intrusive cyber-attacks—usually reserved for dissident Chinese websites.

The impact of these obstructions reaches beyond the content of news reports, affecting the business models and economic sustainability of independent media. As news outlets and journalists struggle with these complex challenges, democratic governments and international donors can offer diplomatic support, professional training, funding for further research, and direct financial assistance where appropriate. Such efforts can yield innovative solutions to a multifaceted challenge to media freedom, helping to sustain vital sources of uncensored news and open political debate for tens of millions of people in China and around the world.

Overview: A Transnational Toolbox

“The Communist Party thinks it’s now powerful enough to intimidate [non-Chinese], from business people to diplomats to academics and journalists, and it’s willing to throw its weight around. It has learned that this often works and is willing to do anything to protect its image and stop negative news from being reported.”

–Paul Mooney, freelance journalist and veteran China reporter²

“I remember clearly the days when you could safely assume that as long as you wrote something abroad, it was free and clear from repercussions ... Suddenly we’re all Hong Kong, where no one wants to offend the mainland because it’s too close.”

–Orville Schell, director of the Asia Society’s Center on U.S.-China Relations³

Since coming to power in 1949, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) has constructed a multi-layered system for censoring unwanted news and stifling opposing viewpoints within China.⁴ Over the past two decades, this domestic apparatus has spawned mechanisms that extend some censorship to media outlets based outside China. Reflecting the adaptive nature of Chinese authoritarianism, such pressures are a complex mix of overt official actions and more discreet dynamics. They manifest themselves in four key ways:

- **Direct action** by Chinese diplomats, local officials, security forces, and regulators both inside and outside China. These measures obstruct newsgathering, prevent the publication of undesirable content, and punish overseas media outlets that fail to heed restrictions.
- **Economic “carrots” and “sticks”** to induce self-censorship among media owners and their outlets headquartered outside mainland China.
- **Indirect pressure** applied via proxies—including advertisers, satellite firms, and foreign governments—who take action to prevent or punish the publication of content critical of Beijing.
- Incidents such as **cyberattacks** and **physical assaults** that are not conclusively traceable to the central Chinese authorities but serve the party’s aims and result from an atmosphere of impunity for those attacking independent media.

In practice, different tactics are adopted for varied media and information environments. For **international media**, local officials and unidentified thugs in China obstruct foreign correspondents, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs delays visa renewals, and central authorities arbitrarily block websites. Outside China, diplomats have been known to apply pressure on senior editors and executives to alter coverage, while recent cyberattacks have infiltrated the global servers of leading outlets such as the *New York Times* and the *Wall Street Journal*.

For non-Chinese language media in **Asia, Africa, and Latin America**, local government officials—particularly in South and Southeast Asia—have taken steps to restrict or punish reporting damaging to China’s reputation. This has occurred either at the behest of Chinese representatives or to preemptively avoid tensions with a large donor and trading partner.

The CCP’s efforts to expand control over Chinese-language media based outside the mainland are more systematic, reflecting how the party’s domestic political concerns often drive foreign policy priorities.

Co-opting owners of media outlets in **Hong Kong, Taiwan**, and the **Chinese diaspora** in order to marginalize dissenting reporting and commentary has been a key strategy. Outlets and owners whose reporting portrays Beijing positively are frequently rewarded with advertising, lucrative contracts for non-media enterprises, joint ventures, and even political appointments. When such tactics fail to reach their objectives, more heavy-handed approaches have been used, such as Chinese officials’ calling journalists and editors directly to castigate them for their coverage.

More forceful measures have been taken to obstruct the operations of independent-minded **offshore Chinese media**. Particular efforts have been made to undermine their financial viability and block mainland audiences’ access to their content. They have suffered advertising boycotts, debilitating cyberattacks, and harassment of contacts in China. In several cases, foreign companies and event organizers—ranging from Apple to Eutelsat to NASDAQ—have barred their access to newsworthy events outside China or assisted in Chinese government efforts to prevent their content from reaching mainland audiences.

The spectrum of Chinese government and party entities involved in these attempts to thwart reporting by foreign and overseas Chinese media is as broad as the tactics applied. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Chinese diplomats worldwide feature regularly in accounts of obstructions ranging from visa denials to demands

for content alterations to pressure on businesses not to advertise with a disfavored outlet. The corresponding entities handling relations with Hong Kong and Taiwan play a similar role in these locations.

Not surprisingly perhaps, many of the same bodies that supervise censorship and surveillance within China are also involved in applying media controls with transnational implications. These include the Communist Party's Central Propaganda Department at the pinnacle of the control apparatus, as well the State Council Information Office, the State Administration for Radio, Film, and Television, the Ministry of Industry and Information Technology, and when interrogation is called for—the Public and State Security Bureaus.

Recent Trends

Some of the above dynamics date back to the 1990s. Nonetheless, over the past five years, certain features have intensified, expanded, and deepened. The paradoxical combination of the CCP feeling emboldened internationally and insecure domestically has contributed to this trend. With more than half of China's population now accessing the Internet and some political content going viral despite domestic censors' efforts, the CCP's nervousness of overseas news trickling in has increased. "Chinese are getting better and better at finding ways around the Great Firewall," freelance journalist Paul Mooney said. "They can immediately read international news stories and are no longer dependent on the official line from the state media. It's no wonder the party is worried."⁵

The following are a number of ways in which the CCP's transnational media controls have evolved in recent years:

- Violent attacks, visa restrictions, and website blocks affecting foreign correspondents and international media outlets have increased.
 - Beijing's efforts to influence newsroom decisions in Hong Kong have intensified, expanding to topics touching upon internal Hong Kong politics.
 - In Taiwan, conditions that have fueled self-censorship in Hong Kong have emerged, with apparent similar effect.
 - Advertisers are shying away from disfavored exile Chinese-language outlets increasingly of their own, pre-emptive accord and not only due to official Chinese pressure.
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- Cyberattacks have been directed at broad targets (such as the global servers of international outlets or foreign hosting providers) as well as specific ones (individual journalists or overseas news websites).

Propaganda and Censorship: Two Sides of the Coin

Testifying in 2011 before the U.S.-China Economics and Security Review Commission about China's foreign propaganda efforts, Ashley Esarey, a scholar of Chinese media, noted:

The objective of CCP leaders is to utilize propaganda to retain high levels of popular support domestically and to improve the regime's international influence. When propaganda messages are disconnected from actions that speak otherwise or challenged by rival perspectives, the effectiveness of propaganda falters and sows doubt among both foreigners and Chinese alike.⁶

Esarey's observation helps make sense of why the party's recent multi-billion dollar effort to expand the reach of state-run media has been coupled with the trends described in this study. For the party's narrative to be convincing to audiences inside and outside China, reporting—especially investigative reporting—about the darker sides of CCP rule at home and Chinese activities abroad must be suppressed.

In seeking to accomplish this aim, the party's transnational obstructions appear to prioritize a set of targets that one former Chinese diplomat said were internally called "the five poisonous groups."⁷ These are Tibetans, Uighurs, practitioners of the Falun Gong spiritual group, Chinese democracy activists, and proponents of Taiwanese independence.⁸ In many instances, these groups and related causes were explicitly mentioned as the focus of direct or self-motivated censorship, highlighting the special importance the CCP attributes to them. The transnational activism of Tibetans and Falun Gong practitioners—including the latter's efforts to build their own media entities free of CCP controls—render them even more frequent targets of restrictions.

These issues touch on some of the most egregious and systematic abuses taking place in China today, pointing to the CCP's nervousness of regime violence being exposed, as well as the human costs of international silence. In addition, the mechanisms used to marginalize discussion of these subjects are easily applied to new topics deemed politically sensitive. In 2012, multifarious reprisals against American news outlets for investigative reports detailing the assets of party leaders' relatives reflected this dynamic. Foreign correspondents' attempts to report on issues

such as land disputes, environmental pollution, and AIDS compensation also encountered interference. These topics collectively affect the lives of tens of millions of people in China and may have global implications.

Esarey's comment above also offers insight into an unexpected finding—that alongside hard news reporting about politically sensitive topics, the CCP appears especially wary of analytical commentary and talk shows in Chinese that promote critical debate about its rule, dissect party propaganda, or evaluate the prospects for democratic change. Many incidents of censorship in Hong Kong, Taiwan, and the Chinese diaspora have involved terminating or neutralizing political analysis programs or commentators, despite—or perhaps because of—their popularity.

The Limits and Impact of Beijing's Influence

In spite of these trends, there are clear limits to Beijing's reach. Media outlets around the world daily put out news that the CCP would likely prefer hidden, and Chinese activists such as Chen Guangcheng have received much international attention. Various factors—from market pressures to journalistic integrity to independent courts—serve as countervailing forces to CCP influence. Foreign correspondents and their Chinese interviewees take great risks to expose unsavory facets of party rule and important changes in Chinese society. Media executives and advertisers in North America boldly refuse Chinese pressures despite potential reprisals. Exile media have developed creative ways to disseminate their content to millions in China. And in Taiwan, a youth-led movement helped prompt retraction of a deal that would have expanded the media holdings of Beijing-friendly tycoons.

At times, the Chinese government's own cost-benefit analysis seems to curb the usual instincts of the censorship apparatus. In Asia, Africa, and Latin America, the CCP appears to have opted for propagandizing its own views via expansion of state-run media and provision of free content to local outlets rather than aggressively pressuring them to follow the party line. In Taiwan, Chinese officials have shied away from intervening in discussions of the island's independence, instead encouraging self-censorship on how the mainland is portrayed. The result is a complex, nuanced, and ever-changing negotiation over where the "red line" lies.

Much is at stake as this transnational contestation unfolds. Independent media outlets facing Chinese reprisals experience rising costs and loss of advertising revenue in an already competitive and financially challenging industry. Individual reporters encounter restrictive editorial policies, threats to their livelihood, and even physical injury. News consumers outside China are deprived of information for assessing the political stability of a major

trading partner, responding to health and environmental crises, or taking action to support Chinese people's quest for a more free and just society.

For Chinese people, the stakes are even higher. In the age of microblogs, circumvention tools, international travel, and satellite television, overseas media outlets offer a vital source of information on matters with life-or-death consequences, be they torture, environmental pollution, or threats to public health. Their ability to function and report uncensored news promotes transparency and accountability in an opaque and arbitrary political system. Beyond hard news, they offer an opportunity for Chinese people to engage directly with the world without the state media's politicized filters. Independent Chinese-language outlets offer users access to diverse perspectives, historical facts, and a more realistic view of their country. The forum for public debate that they provide often engenders a change in perspective that many Chinese find liberating. Thus, when a program is cancelled, a commentator censored, or a publication forced to shut down, the loss is real.

As China's international role expands alongside a deep sense of CCP insecurity at home, these transnational confrontations will grow in importance, presenting both challenges and opportunities for the media assistance community.

International Media

International media interest in China—and scrutiny of its government—have grown commensurate with the country’s economic and geopolitical importance. In the Internet age, such reporting increasingly circulates back into China.⁹

Many correspondents have microblog accounts on Chinese social media platforms or Chinese followers on blocked international services such as Twitter. Several international news organizations maintain Chinese-language websites where they publish both translations of articles in English and original commentary by Chinese contributors. In parallel, loose networks of bilingual netizens translate foreign news pieces and circulate them online informally. In this environment, the Chinese authorities have become highly sensitive to how international media report about the country, the Communist Party, and its officials.

Chinese government entities have thus employed various measures to limit independent reporting by foreign media or discourage its dissemination. These steps can be broadly divided into three areas:

- Obstructing the work of frontline reporters within China, and occasionally outside China.
- Using collective punishment tactics to retaliate against news companies for critical reports.
- Applying pressure on executives and senior editors outside China to suppress unwanted coverage.

Reporting from China: Not an Easy Gig

Since its rise to power in 1949, the CCP has impeded international media outlets’ ability to report freely on developments in China. Until the 1980s, most journalists were barred entry, and much reporting was conducted from Hong Kong. But as controls over the Chinese economy and society have loosened in recent decades, foreign reporters have also been granted more access to the country.

Today, even as media outlets cut back on foreign correspondents, China is one of the few places where many have retained—or even added—a bureau. Between 2002 and 2013, the number of outlets with a China presence grew from 199 to 441 and the contingent of foreign correspondents from 353 to 682.¹⁰ This foreign press corps includes journalists from the United States, Europe, Australia, and other parts of Asia, collectively serving as the eyes and ears of hundreds of millions of people around the world.

Despite improved access since the 1970s, the treatment of foreign correspondents in China falls far below international standards.¹¹ Foreign journalists, as well as their assistants, offices, and sometimes families are under constant surveillance, both online and offline. Officials regularly block access to sites of important news stories, while Chinese sources are threatened or subjected to harassment, beatings, job loss, and detention (though many choose to speak to reporters anyway). Meanwhile, state agencies routinely refuse to give meaningful—if any—responses to journalists’ queries.

In surveys and articles, foreign correspondents have described hotel staff alerting local security bureaus to their presence, finding their smart phones were mysteriously submerged in water and the files on their laptops deleted during their absence, and discovering after their departure that police showed Chinese contacts records of their online communications with the journalists.¹²

In advance of the 2008 Olympics, the Chinese authorities loosened some restrictions on foreign media, a partial attempt to fulfill promises made when Beijing was competing to host the sporting event. Several foreign news websites were temporarily unblocked for the duration of the games, but by December most blocks were reinstated. Regulations amended in January 2007 removed travel restrictions on foreign media and allowed journalists to interview individuals without prior government consent. In a move that raised hopes of long-term improvements, the government permanently extended the rules in October 2008.¹³

Instead, these minor adjustments and brief opening surrounding the Olympic games have been followed by an era of growing obstacles since 2008. Surveys administered by the Foreign Correspondents Club of China (FCCC) in 2011 and 2013, for example, found that 94 percent and 70 percent of respondents, respectively, felt conditions had declined since the previous year.¹⁴

Four main trends illustrate the growing challenges facing foreign correspondents in China:

- **Increased physical violence.** During the last six years, foreign journalists have been beaten, kicked, assaulted with baseball bats, and detained when attempting to report on incidents ranging from land protests in Zhejiang to an activist’s trial in Sichuan.¹⁵ Some assaults were carried out by unidentified thugs, but often security forces were involved or stood idly by.¹⁶ Following the 2007 amendments, such attacks have replaced travel restrictions and periodic, short detentions as a key—and arguably more serious—threat to reporters. Nevertheless, many

correspondents emphasize that the dangers they face pale in comparison to concerns for the personal safety of Chinese sources and assistants, many of whom have also faced intensified intimidation and monitoring since passage of the looser travel rules.

- **Arbitrary restrictions on reporting location.** Despite the new travel regulations, central and local authorities continue to block journalists' access to certain locations. For example, travel to the Tibetan Autonomous Region (TAR) requires official permission. Meanwhile, a series of ad hoc restrictions have been applied to broadly defined geographical areas (such as access to Tibetan communities outside the TAR or television filming in public spaces)¹⁷ as well as to highly specific locations (such as a Guangdong factory town during workers' protests,¹⁸ Beijing's Wangfujing shopping district as the site of proposed anti-government demonstrations,¹⁹ and the parking lot of the hospital where activist Chen Guangcheng was being treated for foot injuries following his escape from house arrest to the U.S. Embassy).²⁰
 - **Closer visa scrutiny, delays, and rejections.** Under Chinese regulations, foreign journalists are required to renew their visa annually. Though this has long been used as a possible point of leverage for punishing critical reporting, during the past three years, the authorities have become more inclined to translate threat into action. In 2011, the FCCC reported that 27 journalists had experienced unusual delays in visa processing and that six were told by the Foreign Ministry that their applications were rejected or put on hold because of the content of their articles.²¹ In 2013, ten percent of respondents reported difficulties obtaining press accreditation because of their reporting.²² During 2012, two journalists—Melissa Chan of al-Jazeera English and Chris Buckley of the *New York Times*—were forced to leave the country after the authorities refused to renew their visas, the first such de facto expulsions since 1998.²³ In a public statement, the FCCC referred to Chan's removal as "the most extreme example of a recent pattern of using journalist visas in an attempt to censor and intimidate foreign correspondents in China."²⁴ Even when journalists are able to renew their visas, official behavior during the process can be intimidating. One journalist recalled how during an interview at a Chinese diplomatic mission in his home country—a new procedure enforced by the government—officials provided a detailed review of his recent articles and expressed hope that he would be more "objective" in the future.²⁵ The same journalist was previously asked that
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his spouse accompany him to a meeting at the local Public Security Bureau in Beijing. Pressure related to visa renewals is unequivocally applied by representatives of the central government, including the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, rather than by local authorities.

- **Increasingly sophisticated and widespread cyberattacks.** Experiencing unusual computer problems and finding new forms of malware on their devices have become routine for foreign reporters in China. In its 2013 annual report, the FCCC cited “increased cyber harassment and hacking attacks” as one of its greatest concerns.²⁶ Phishing attacks targeting foreign correspondents have become more sophisticated and harder to detect. A 2009 report by the Canada-based Information Warfare Monitor described an e-mail and accompanying infected PDF that were sent to Chinese assistants at international news organizations. The content was written in perfect English, relayed a credible request, and included names and contact information of real individuals who would reasonably appear on a list of potential interviewees.²⁷

The geographic reach of these trends has not been limited to China. In early 2013, several news organizations—including the *New York Times*, the *Wall Street Journal*, and the *Washington Post*—publicized that they had been the victims of complex cyberattacks by Chinese hackers. The attacks not only targeted individual China-based journalists, but also infiltrated the companies’ servers outside China. The attackers apparently wished to obtain pre-publication warning on reports critical of the Chinese government and to identify sources of information provided to foreign correspondents. Though the attacks could not be conclusively traced to Chinese government entities, several features lend credibility to that assertion.²⁸

At one point, heightened activity of Chinese hackers who had infiltrated the *New York Times* global server on the night of the 2012 U.S. presidential election prompted fears among senior editors that the site could be compromised at a critical time. Ultimately, the hackers were focused on the narrow objective of tracking information related to an exposé about the financial holdings of Premier Wen Jiabao’s family, but the incident highlighted the potential for cyberattacks by the Chinese government or its sympathizers to affect coverage of political consequence in other countries.²⁹

Separately, Chinese security agents and local police have repeatedly harassed foreign journalists in Nepal who were reporting on the treatment of Tibetan refugees. A 2008 report by Human Rights Watch noted several instances of Chinese police questioning foreign journalists on Nepal’s territory and at least two cases of Nepalese police beating

international correspondents covering Tibetan protests.³⁰ More recently, a CNN crew reported in February 2012 that men appearing to be plainclothes Chinese security personnel crossed the border into Nepal and followed them deep into a Nepalese village as they tried to interview residents for a story on Tibetan refugees.³¹

Collective Punishment

Beyond an individual journalist's career or physical safety, the impact of such obstacles affects the broader ability of news organizations to report from China. When television correspondent Melissa Chan's visa renewal was refused, al-Jazeera English had to shutter its presence in China because no visa was granted for a replacement.³² Bureau chiefs from the *New York Times* and the *Washington Post* have also been unsuccessful in securing visas, though their colleagues still report from inside the country.³³ Several other correspondents told the FCCC that officials implied their visa delay was due to their predecessor's reporting.³⁴ In Chan's case, it remains unclear whether her visa rejection was a reprisal for her own muckraking or for a segment on labor camp abuses produced by her U.S.-based colleagues.³⁵

These examples reflect a broader phenomenon whereby the targets of Chinese sanctions expand beyond specifically offending content or an individual journalist to collective retaliation against an entire outlet, sometimes with notable financial implications. The Chinese government's multifaceted reaction to investigative reports by Bloomberg and the *New York Times* in 2012 about large financial holdings by the kin of then Vice President Xi Jinping and Premier Wen Jiabao exemplify these dynamics.³⁶

In both instances, the Chinese authorities chose to block the outlet's entire website indefinitely, an unusual move against major news organizations.³⁷ This was despite the capacity of the country's refined Internet filters to block individual pages within a website—a tactic employed regularly to restrict access to articles deemed sensitive within otherwise tolerated sources, including the Chinese-language websites of the *Financial Times* or the *Wall Street Journal*. As of September 2013, both sites remained inaccessible from China.³⁸

Reflecting their varied business operations in China, the official retaliation against the two outlets manifested itself differently. For the *Times*, the blocking of not only its English but also its newly launched Chinese-language website produced palpable financial losses. Overnight, the company's stock lost 20 percent of its value.³⁹ The outlet was forced to renegotiate agreements with numerous advertisers, causing revenue loss.⁴⁰ As noted above, *Times'* employees subsequently faced visa renewal problems and cyber espionage related to the Wen report.

Bloomberg's English-only website does not have a broad audience within China. The blocking thus seems motivated less by a wish to damage Bloomberg's access to Chinese readers, than by a desire to signal that finance-oriented news sources are not exempt from wholesale blocking if they embark on sensitive political investigations.⁴¹ More central to Bloomberg's operations in China are its financial data terminals, used by large banks and firms.⁴² The public gesture of blocking its website was combined with other threatening measures. In July, the *Financial Times* reported that during the first weeks after Bloomberg's article about Xi was published:

[P]eople believed to be state security agents have tailed some Bloomberg employees; Chinese bankers and financial regulators have cancelled previously arranged meetings with ... Bloomberg's editor-in-chief; and Chinese investigators have visited local investment banks to see if they shared any information with Bloomberg.⁴³

Such actions appear to have deterred at least some would-be business partners and clients.⁴⁴ According to the FCCC, Bloomberg "reportedly suffered significant commercial harm from a drop in sales of its data terminals."⁴⁵ Like the *Times*, Bloomberg also encountered attempted cyber intrusions and difficulties securing journalists visas.

Pressure to Remove Unwanted Coverage

Chinese officials occasionally take more direct action to impede news reporting, explicitly pressuring international media executives and senior editors to take down or refrain from publishing a critical report.

Both the *New York Times* and Bloomberg were strongly urged to drop the articles about top leaders' family assets when Chinese officials became aware of the upcoming exclusives. After Bloomberg offered the Chinese government an opportunity to comment two weeks before publication, the Chinese ambassador to the United States met personally with the company's editor-in-chief in Washington alongside other behind-the-scenes pressure.⁴⁶

More recently, in June 2013, the television station France 24 reported that Chinese embassy officials visited its Paris headquarters and met with the chief executive after it aired a brief documentary titled "Seven Days in Tibet." According to Reporters Without Borders, the diplomats denounced the piece and demanded its removal from the station's website, a request the outlet refused.⁴⁷ Without providing the full details, the FCCC noted similar incidents occurring in London and Berlin over reporting by the *Financial Times* and ARD TV, respectively.⁴⁸

In 2009, such pressures apparently prompted Maori TV in New Zealand to screen a Chinese-government produced film maligning Uighur leader Rebiya Kadeer immediately after an independent documentary about her life and activism.⁴⁹

The FCCC itself has come under pressure for drawing international attention to the treatment of foreign correspondents. Chinese officials treat it as an “illegal organization,” an implicit reminder of the fragility of its continued operation.⁵⁰ In February 2011, the club was forced to stop publishing incident reports on its website. According to FCCC president Peter Ford, the decision was made after the Chinese “Foreign Ministry threatened the FCCC president and other officers with unspecified ‘serious consequences’ if the club continued to make public statements that the government regarded as political.”⁵¹

Long-Term Impact

Hard-hitting reporting from China continues to reach newsstands and television screens around the world. Nonetheless, the Chinese government’s efforts to thwart independent investigations have taken a toll on international media coverage of the country.

When sources are intimidated into silence, journalists are forced to abandon potentially newsworthy stories—including on health issues such as AIDS and deadly asbestos—or invest an inordinate amount of time and money to complete them.⁵²

Lack of unimpeded access to regions such as Xinjiang and Tibet has hindered independent investigations of severe crackdowns, disappearances, and torture. Blocked access has sometimes forced overreliance on Chinese state media reports, whose unverified details—on the death toll during ethnic unrest, for example—eventually seep into Western news items as statements of fact. Similarly, one study on international news coverage of Falun Gong found that reports about the spiritual practice were few and far between, despite the ongoing scale and severity of abuses suffered by its adherents.⁵³

Psychological elements add another dimension, as fears over physical safety, access to the country, or family privacy can make reporters think twice about what they write. According to free-lance journalist Mooney, who is awaiting a new visa, a cautious mood has settled over the foreign press corps:

I'm sure that a lot of journalists would deny being intimidated by such tactics... but I'm positive that some people buckle and keep away from certain "sensitive" topics because they're afraid of not getting a visa ... Recently, some colleagues have encouraged me to stop Tweeting and making comments about China on other social media and academic list serves, which we assume are being monitored. It's in the back of my mind all the time, but I've not curtailed what I do.⁵⁴

Collective punishment tactics generate conflicting stances among departments within a news organization, as sales are potentially damaged or boosted by editorial decisions. International media have oftentimes defiantly resisted direct and indirect pressures to alter their content, despite potential financial losses.

But not always. Even well respected outlets have faced allegations of self-censorship. Bloomberg, for instance, chose not to release an accompanying video segment to the Xi Jinping article after the Chinese government's persistent expressions of displeasure with the investigation.⁵⁵ A 2010 article in a Human Rights in China publication cited several controversies that erupted over content changes on the BBC's Chinese-language service (including a 2009 interview with the Dalai Lama), as it sought to increase online readership from China via entertainment features and partnerships with mainland entities.⁵⁶

In 2012, the *Washington Post's* then ombudsman, Patrick B. Pexton, questioned the paper's handling of an interview with Xi Jinping that was printed verbatim based on Chinese-dictated questions and replies. He noted the *Post's* difficulty securing visas and the receipt of significant income from a Chinese-state run advertorial insert as pressure points.⁵⁷ The above-mentioned study that found disproportionately low coverage of Falun Gong in major Western news outlets (including the *Post*) cited self-censorship and CCP obstructions as two factors contributing to the phenomenon. Other factors cited include unfamiliarity with self-cultivation traditions, "compassion fatigue" regarding human rights abuses, and typically weak coverage of new religious movements.⁵⁸

The existence of self-censorship is difficult to conclusively document, but such incidents are nonetheless a reminder of the CCP's capacity to influence Western media reporting on China. As Pexton noted, "There is interdependence in the relationship, and constant negotiation and compromise. The Chinese know it, and they take advantage of it."⁵⁹

Local Media: Africa, Latin America, and Asia

The Chinese government's relationship with local media in Africa, Latin America, and Asia differs considerably from its interactions with mainstream international media. Most outlets do not have their own correspondents permanently stationed in China and instead rely on international newswire services for coverage of events in the PRC. The Chinese government has invested significant diplomatic and financial resources towards expanding the reach of state-run media, offering training to journalists from these regions, and inserting favorable content into local media coverage.⁶⁰ This propagandizing of the government's views appears to be the dominant tactic for influencing the public, rather than a systematic attempt to curtail critical reporting or commentary.

Nevertheless, journalists and press freedom watchdogs in several countries complained that restricted access to Chinese officials occasionally impeded reporting. Media observers from Guyana and Nigeria, for example, noted a culture of secrecy and lack of transparency by Chinese officials, companies, and local regulators.⁶¹ In Trinidad and Tobago, one television journalist reported, "We were told that only Chinese journalists would be allowed," referring to an event involving Chinese officials during the June 2013 visit of Chinese President Xi Jinping.⁶² During a December 2011 visit to Nepal by then-Chinese Premier Wen Jiabao, only three journalists representing local state-owned media were permitted to cover the visit, with independent reporters excluded.⁶³

Such exclusions appear to be the exception rather than the rule, however, and in many countries local media attended major press events involving Chinese officials.

More troubling is a trend in several Asian countries where local government actors—rather than Chinese officials—have taken action to constrain, or even punish, reporters and ordinary citizens who disseminated information critical of the Chinese government. One press freedom researcher from Cambodia describes the situation there:

The majority of traditional media outlets in Cambodia are state owned. As Cambodia receives a significant amount of aid from China ... media outlets aligned with the government [are] unlikely to report negatively about China. [For example] pressure by the Cambodian government, due to its close relationship with China, influenced how the [2012] story [of French citizen Patrick Devillers] was reported in the state-run media.⁶⁴

Patrick Devillers had been friendly with former Chongqing party secretary Bo Xilai and his wife. Cambodian authorities detained him in June 2012 at the request of the Chinese government and he travelled to China, apparently voluntarily, the following month to answer questions related to criminal investigations against Bo

and his wife. He returned to Cambodia in August 2012, but the incident sparked diplomatic tensions between Cambodia, China, and France.⁶⁵

Local government tolerance for criticism of China is especially tested during protests against the Chinese regime or if local residents support causes deemed sensitive to Beijing. A 2008 report by Human Rights Watch criticized the Nepalese authorities for attacks on journalists covering protests by Tibetan refugees, about 15,000 of whom reside in Nepal.⁶⁶ The International Campaign for Tibet reported an incident in March 2009, when:

Nepalese journalists seeking to cover a vigil at Boudhanath Stupa ... had their memory cards from their cameras seized by Nepalese police. A Tibetan journalist working for a Tibetan language newspaper was also detained ... and released upon payment of a large bribe. The journalist ... was apparently accused of writing articles that were “anti-China”, and his home was searched.⁶⁷

Such incidents appear to have had a long-term impact. “There is a great deal of self-censorship by journalists in Nepal because they fear being reproached by the Nepalese government for unfavorable coverage of China,” said Abha Parekh, a graduate student at Columbia University who has studied press freedom in Nepal. “This applies specifically to the one China policy and to Tibet.”⁶⁸

In Vietnam, the Vietnamese Communist Party (VCP) tightly controls most media, but online journalists and bloggers have emerged as relatively independent voices and are often critical of China, prompting official backlash against them. In August and September 2009, Vietnamese authorities arrested three bloggers after they had posted comments critical of the government’s handling of relations with China, especially with regard to territorial disputes and prospective bauxite mining; all were released without charge within a few weeks.⁶⁹ The arrests likely reflect the VCP’s sensitivity to public debate about its China policy as much as behind-the-scenes Chinese pressures, but nonetheless it suggests that journalists and bloggers in Vietnam must be careful when writing about their northern neighbor.

A more blatant case of Chinese pressure prompting Vietnamese repression began in 2010. In November of the following year, a court in Hanoi sentenced two Vietnamese citizens to two and three years in prison for transmitting shortwave radio broadcasts from their farm to listeners in China. The broadcasts contained Chinese-language content from Sound of Hope, a radio network run by Falun Gong practitioners in the United States

whose programming includes reports on human rights abuses, traditional Chinese culture, and political debate often critical of the Communist Party.⁷⁰ The indictment cited a diplomatic memo sent by the Chinese Embassy to the Vietnamese authorities in May 2010, before the men’s arrest. The memo noted detection of the signal and requested that the activities of Falun Gong adherents in Vietnam’s territory be “attacked and stopped.”⁷¹

A similar case emerged in Indonesia. Radio Era Baru, a local affiliate of Sound of Hope, has faced repeated attempts by Indonesian authorities to shut it down, although its broadcasts do not reach China. In 2010, prosecutors charged the station’s manager, Gatot Machali, with “broadcasting without authorization.” In September 2011, a court in Batam sentenced Gatot to six months in prison and Indonesian security forces raided the station, confiscating its equipment.⁷² Gatot is appealing the case and in September 2012, the station scored a victory when the Supreme Court ruled in its favor regarding a frequency dispute, though it has yet to resume broadcasting.⁷³

The Indonesian government has denied that the action against Era Baru is due to Chinese pressure. However, a 2007 leaked letter addressed from the Chinese Embassy in Jakarta to the Indonesian Ministry of Foreign Affairs refers to Era Baru and explicitly “requests the Indonesian side ... to terminate the license” of the radio station, hinting that its ongoing operation undermines bilateral relations.⁷⁴

Absent Tibetan refugee communities, significant numbers of Falun Gong activists, or territorial disputes with China, fewer cases of such points of friction have emerged in Africa and Latin America. Nevertheless, sporadic incidents of Chinese pressure to suppress dissenting voices outside the media sphere have occurred in South Africa and Mexico,⁷⁵ pointing to the potential for media controls to arise in these regions as well. In August 2013, two Chinese government-linked entities purchased a 20 percent stake in one of the South Africa’s largest newspaper chains.⁷⁶ Developments in Hong Kong and Taiwan, as described in the following section, highlight how such increasing interdependence and cooperation between Chinese officials, local media outlets, and businesses could provide leverage for future self-censorship.

Mainstream Media in Hong Kong and Taiwan

As Hong Kong was preparing for its return to Chinese sovereignty in 1997, many outside observers and local residents feared a dramatic decline in press freedom as the territory's freewheeling media encountered the authority of a central government wary of criticism.

Overall, such fears did not materialize. Adhering to the "one country, two systems" arrangement, Beijing largely refrained from intervening in Hong Kong's affairs or using overtly repressive tactics to punish unfavorable reporting. However, it did not entirely abandon the instinct to control Hong Kong's vigorous media.

Rather, a gradual transformation occurred in the media ecology in Hong Kong throughout the 1990s and early 2000s. The result was a rise in self-censorship on topics deemed sensitive by Beijing and a collective shift in media coverage towards less critical discourse.⁷⁷ An impressive body of academic literature and reports by press freedom watchdogs have documented this transformation and the direct or indirect tactics Beijing has employed to induce self-censorship.⁷⁸

Central to the Communist Party's ability to reduce unfavorable coverage in Hong Kong media has been the co-optation of media owners. As Anne Cheung notes in her book *Self-Censorship and the Struggle for Press Freedom in Hong Kong*:

Many media owners in Hong Kong have vested business interests in China or are eager to expand in the China market. They can ill afford to offend the ruling regime ... From this perspective, media owners become the indirect, but the most effective, agents of [the central] political authorities.⁷⁹

Before and after the 1997 transition, a number of influential newspapers run as family businesses were bought by tycoons with business interests in China and close ties to mainland officials, such as *Ming Pao Daily*, *Sing Tao Daily*, and *Sing Pao*.⁸⁰

Soon, a number of observable patterns emerged at these and other outlets signaling growing pressure within the media industry to reduce criticism of the central government, including:⁸¹

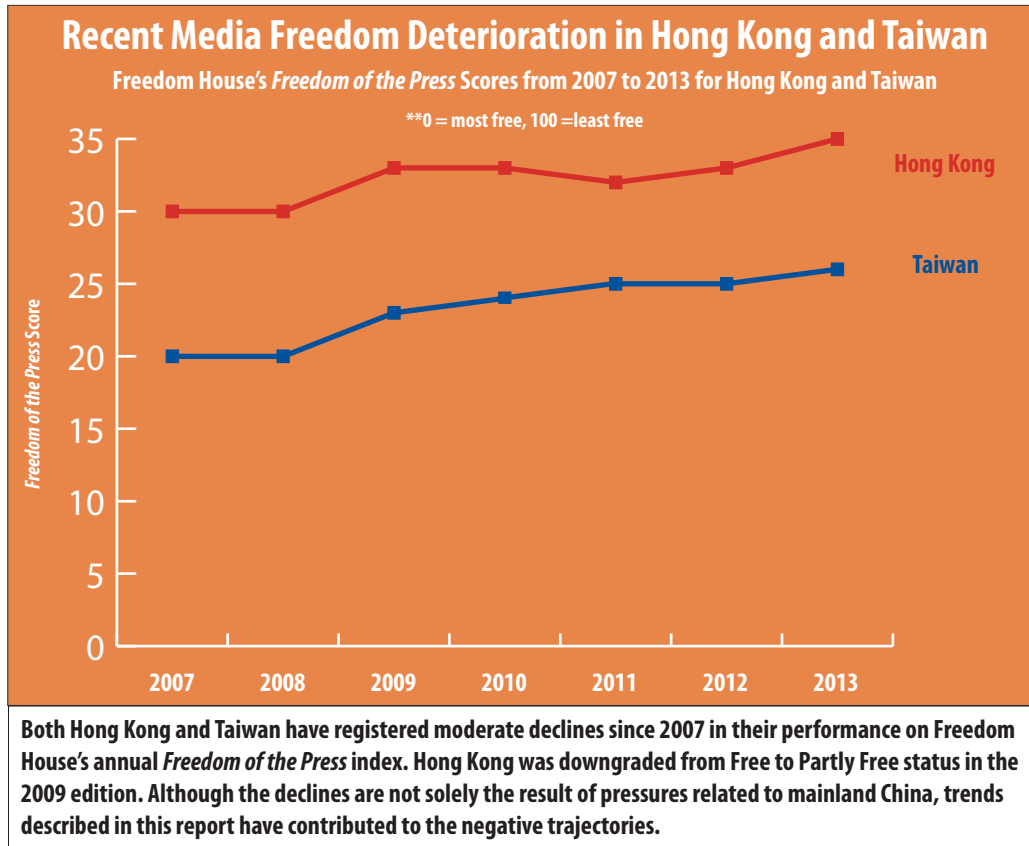
- Reports of non-editorial management staff and owners acting as "censors."
- Popular but "high risk" contributors being terminated.⁸²

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- High turnover rates as journalists left their employer or the profession entirely due to political interference or an “unpalatable editorial policy.”
 - Visible, though often subtle, changes in coverage reflecting an attempt to accommodate CCP sensibilities, while avoiding abrupt alterations that could damage their credibility with the public, such as:
 - Avoiding or limiting coverage of politically sensitive topics, for example, the 1989 military crackdown on Tiananmen Square protesters, Falun Gong, Tibet, Xinjiang, and Taiwanese independence.
 - Shifting critical opinions from front to back pages.
 - Choosing “politically correct” rhetoric.⁸³
 - Reducing investigative journalism in favor of soft news or a simple accounting of emerging events.

Simultaneously, media outlets and owners friendly to Beijing were rewarded with advertising, joint ventures, lucrative mainland contracts for non-media enterprises, and political appointments. Since 2005, the Chinese authorities have further formalized their relationship with many of Hong Kong’s media owners. At least 10 have been appointed to the Chinese People’s Political Consultative Congress (CPPCC), a mainland advisory body that has little real influence over government policy but is used by the Communist Party to co-opt powerful members of society.⁸⁴ Several media owners are also current or former members of the National People’s Congress, China’s largely rubber-stamp parliament.

PRC authorities have also occasionally taken measures—such as the imprisonment of a Hong Kong journalist on the mainland in 2005⁸⁵—that target media workers directly and serve to encourage cautious reporting. In addition, routine controls may be reinforced with occasional direct communication by Chinese officials with journalists, commentators, or owners, signaling that relevant writings are being closely monitored.

Outlets that have remained highly critical of the Communist Party—most notably Jimmy Lai’s Next Media Group—have faced reprisals, although its *Apple Daily* newspaper is still one of the most widely read in the territory. To



date, *Apple Daily* journalists are routinely denied visas to China,⁸⁶ and the outlet has reportedly been deprived of tens of millions of dollars in potential advertising revenues due to a coordinated boycott by real estate tycoons, an essential source of income for Hong Kong media outlets.⁸⁷

These tactics have indeed achieved some of their goals. A survey published in 2012 by the Hong Kong Journalists Association (HKJA) found that about 35 percent of journalists queried admitted to self-censorship, citing "downplaying information unfavorable to the Central government," as one of its most common manifestations.⁸⁸ This trend contributed to Freedom House downgrading Hong Kong's status from Free to Partly Free in its 2009 *Freedom of the Press* report.

Still, Hong Kong media remain significantly freer than their mainland counterparts and journalists have sought various strategies for expressing critical views without drawing reprisals.⁸⁹ Perceived shortcomings in the Chinese authorities' ability to influence public opinion in Hong Kong may be spurring more heavy-handed interference.

A Heavier Hand in Hong Kong

As noted earlier, in the initial aftermath of the handover, Beijing refrained from openly intervening in Hong Kong's affairs, while seeking to exert its influence subtly, particularly via friendly media owners. Sixteen years later, self-censorship remains a concern. Periodically, public debate refocuses on the issue, and the transformative process that began in the 1990s continues to run its course. In 2012, controversy erupted at the English-language *South China Morning Post* after a former employee of the state-run *China Daily* was promoted to editor-in-chief.⁹⁰ Soon after, staff accused him of downplaying an article on the suspicious death of a mainland activist and discontinuing the contract of the award-winning journalist Paul Mooney, who had written many of the paper's hardest hitting stories on human rights violations in China.⁹¹

Developments during Chief Executive Donald Tsang's tenure, and particularly since 2011, point to a parallel process underway whereby Chinese—and at time Hong Kong—officials adopt more repressive and intrusive measures to obstruct independent reporting. This process is reflected in three main trends:

- Increased violence against Hong Kong journalists reporting from China and occasional obstructions in Hong Kong, including during visits by Chinese officials.⁹²
- Greater influence by Beijing's Liaison Office and former journalists from state-run media on newsroom decisions.
- The expansion of targeted topics from those related to events in China to ones relevant to Hong Kong's internal politics.

The latter two trends were especially evident in 2012 surrounding the run-up to the election for chief executive in March. During that time, the central government shifted its support from candidate Henry Tang to the eventual winner, Leung Chun-ying. Freedom House notes in its 2013 *Freedom of the Press* report:

Press freedom groups reported that staff from the Liaison Office of the Central People's Government ... contacted newspaper publishers, owners, and even editors by telephone or in person to castigate them for articles that were critical of Leung or pressure them to report favorably on the office itself.⁹³

In many cases, the targeted journalists staved off the pressure. But in one instance perceived as a heavy-handed infringement on press freedom, *Sing Pao* altered an opinion column by commentator Johnny Lau. Lau's original piece had rejected both Tang and Leung, but the published article reframed it as virtually endorsing Leung. The editor initially apologized, but Lau's column was discontinued later in the year after he submitted a piece about the death of a prominent U.S.-based Chinese democracy advocate. These incidents denote a change from the past, when the targets of Chinese pressure were primarily voices and topics perceived as politically sensitive on the mainland, rather than related to internal Hong Kong politics.

Alongside more direct intervention by the Liaison Office, the HKJA's July 2013 annual report noted a number of personnel and structural changes that may indicate an effort to increase compliance with the party line. At the *Sing Pao Daily News*, a veteran Xinhua News Agency journalist was appointed as publisher. According to the HKJA, at three particularly pro-Beijing newspapers (*Ta Kung Pao*, *Wen Wei Po*, and *the Hong Kong Commercial Daily*), special internal groups were established. Their members are mostly from the mainland and are tasked with vetting the publications' articles.⁹⁴

The HKJA raises the concern that these trends have been continuing under the new leadership in Beijing and may further intensify in the coming years. Specifically, the report highlights the revival of a Chinese policy to "regain the Hong Kong" media.⁹⁵ It notes that this is the third time such an initiative to amplify controls has been undertaken, each time spurred by an incident in which a large number of Hong Kong residents opposed a move by Beijing.⁹⁶ The latest push has reportedly surfaced in reaction to protests during the fall of 2012 when Hong Kong residents rejected a national education curriculum as parents feared it would entail indoctrinating children to uncritically accept the legitimacy of one-party rule. Under public pressure, the Hong Kong government was forced to withdraw the plan.

The renewed effort to "regain the Hong Kong media" has thus far manifested itself in ongoing phone calls by Chinese officials to journalists and editors, as well as the arrival in Hong Kong of several veterans of the mainland propaganda apparatus. Most notably, Yang Jian—who had worked at Xinhua for 23 years before

rising in the ranks of the CCP's propaganda department in Guangdong—arrived in Hong Kong in May 2013 as the Liaison Office's new deputy director and supervisor of propaganda affairs, including media relations.⁹⁷ This is the first time that the individual holding this post had previously worked in the party's propaganda arm on the mainland.

According to the HKJA, journalists in Hong Kong interpreted Yang's arrival as potentially serving two purposes: to increase the influence of pro-Beijing news outlets relative to their competitors and to tighten China's grip on the media in general.⁹⁸ Whatever the reason, it signals that Chinese officials have little intention of relaxing efforts to suppress critical reporting by Hong Kong's still vigorous media any time soon.

Testing the Waters With Taiwanese Media

The evolution of Taiwan's media environment has followed a notably different path from Hong Kong's. During decades of authoritarian rule, outlets owned by the state or the ruling Kuomintang (KMT) party dominated the media landscape. As part of Taiwan's democratization, the media market liberalized, outlets sympathetic to pro-independence (or "green") opposition parties were established, and the KMT loosened its controls. Even pro-KMT (or "blue") media outlets asserted their editorial independence from the government. Today, Taiwan has one of the freest media environments in Asia.⁹⁹ However, fierce competition and rising production costs have contributed to a decline in the newspaper industry, leaving only four major papers with large circulation. This has increased outlets' vulnerability to political and commercial pressures from owners and advertisers.

The PRC views Taiwan as a part of China. On the international scene, the Chinese government has long pressured other states and global institutions to avoid actions or wording that might acknowledge Taiwanese sovereignty, including restricting access for Taiwanese journalists to international events.¹⁰⁰ Regarding the situation within Taiwan, China's stated goal of cross-strait policies is eventual reunification, with the use of military force if needed. However, opinions polls indicate a majority of Taiwanese favor the status quo over reunification,¹⁰¹ and in Taiwan's democratic system, voters influence government decisions. Given the historical rivalry between the CCP and the KMT, several laws restrict the dissemination of Chinese state-run media in Taiwan. Thus, the Chinese government's most effective avenue for influencing public opinion may be via locally-owned media. Expanding trade between Taiwan and mainland China have increased interdependence, creating new opportunities for Chinese officials to leverage economic ties to induce self-censorship.¹⁰²

In this context, a number of changes have occurred in Taiwan's media environment that parallel developments in Hong Kong during the 1990s.

In November 2008, China Times group, one of the island's largest media syndicates, was acquired by Tsai Eng-Meng, chairman of Want Want China holdings, a snack and drink company with robust sales in mainland China.¹⁰³ Previously, *China Times* had been one of the island's most influential papers, known for quality reporting and thoughtful analysis. The paper reported both positively and negatively about the Chinese government, including publishing news on human rights abuses and columns by Chinese dissidents. Nevertheless, it suffered from financial difficulties, prompting its sale in 2008. Hong Kong media mogul Jimmy Lai was a prospective buyer, but at the last minute, Tsai outbid him and took control of the newspaper, along with two television stations and a number of other print publications.¹⁰⁴

Reports soon began to emerge of internal top-down pressures to report more favorably about China and its government.¹⁰⁵ Outside observers soon noted a palpable shift towards a more pro-Beijing stance, commercial orientation, and focus on entertainment.¹⁰⁶ In January 2010, *China Times* editor-in-chief Hsia Chen was transferred to the much less influential *China Times Weekly* as apparent punishment over a headline that called Chinese envoy Chen Yunlin a "C-list official."¹⁰⁷ When asked about the incident, Tsai warned that journalists "need to think carefully before they write."¹⁰⁸ In June 2010, a column for June 4 in *Want Daily* newspaper commemorated historical events on both sides of the Taiwan Strait but failed to mention the military crackdown in Beijing on that date in 1989.¹⁰⁹

Though it is impossible to know for certain, the change in editorial direction among the Want Want Group's outlets does not appear to reflect direct pressure from the CCP. Rather, in Tsai's case, his personal political views seem to sincerely match Beijing's. This became evident in controversial comments he made to the *Washington Post* in 2012, when expressing his desire to see swift reunification with China and his opinion that "reports of a massacre [in 1989] were not true" and that "not that many people could really have died."¹¹⁰ An internal newsletter published by Want Want in December 2008 noted that Tsai had informed an official at China's Taiwan Affairs Office that after purchasing the media group, he would "use the power of the press to advance relations between China and Taiwan."¹¹¹

Nevertheless, Tsai and his mainland business interests have clearly benefited from close ties to the Chinese government. An April article in the *Economist* listed Want Want as one of 45 privately owned enterprises

receiving Chinese government subsidies. For Want Want, these totaled \$47 million in 2011, equal to 11 percent of its profits that year.¹¹²

Want Want Group publications as well as outlets like *United Daily News*, another leading newspaper that is relatively pro-China, have concluded a number of cooperative agreements with mainland media, though the details of their precise financial value are not publicly available.¹¹³ In addition, an affiliated office established in 2005 in Beijing¹¹⁴ apparently acts as a middleman to channel advertorial content and public relations contracts from local Chinese government agencies to various Taiwanese media outlets, particularly when a provincial official is planning a visit to the island.¹¹⁵ Such arrangements have proved controversial in Taiwan because they seem to circumvent laws barring Chinese government advertising in Taiwanese media and “embedded marketing” generally.¹¹⁶

For media outlets that have traditionally been critical of China and advocated more Taiwan-centered identity politics, Chinese government entities have sought to woo their owners via invitations for visits, participation in government-hosted media forums, and especially, opportunities for expansion of cultural productions into the Chinese market.¹¹⁷ As television stations in Taiwan pursue lucrative mainland expansion for their programming and celebrities, industry insiders report a rise in self-censorship and in some cases, actions by executives to suppress discussion of topics deemed politically sensitive to Beijing.¹¹⁸

In April 2009, Sanlih E-Television (SET) executives reportedly issued a request that a documentary about the Dalai Lama be aired no later than 6 a.m., a suspiciously awkward time slot for a topic many Taiwanese find interesting.¹¹⁹ In May 2012, Cheng Hung-yi, the host of SET’s *The Talking Show*, a popular Taiwanese dialect political debate and commentary program, resigned. Although the station claimed it was for family reasons, credible sources indicated the resignation followed a series of incidents in which executives attempted to restrict discussion of sensitive issues and then wished to change the program’s name, format, and focus.¹²⁰ One insider who wished to remain anonymous said that before its cancellation, executives would screen the show’s run-down and guest list before filming to ensure content displeasing to Beijing would be avoided. Summarizing his own observations as a regular guest on *the Talking Show*, Chung Nien-Huang told the *Taipei Times* in November 2012:

At first, the head of the TV station, citing his business ties with Chinese firms, asked the program to tone down its criticisms of China. Then, the show was forbidden from making any

reference to issues pertaining to Tibet, the 1989 Tiananmen Square massacre and Falun Gong. The interference culminated with the program's permanent suspension in May.¹²¹

Such reports coincide with a shift in SET's business strategy to target the mainland market for the sale of its fictional dramas that are popular in Taiwan. In 2009, it concluded agreements that enabled the dramas to be accessible to Chinese viewers via popular online video platforms such as Tudou. In 2012, the station was seeking approval from mainland regulators for dramas to be aired on television, a much more profitable avenue.¹²² According to the Associated Press, such deals could earn the station \$66 million, while the talk show generated only \$16 million in advertising revenue.¹²³

The developments at these particular outlets have been accompanied by broader shifts in media coverage and the journalistic profession in recent years.¹²⁴ Media analysts, as well as current and former journalists interviewed for this report, consistently noted an increase in self-censorship on topics deemed sensitive to Beijing, be it the 1989 massacre or the treatment of ethnic and religious groups such as Tibetans, Uighur Muslims, and Falun Gong practitioners.¹²⁵

Interestingly, there appears to be less pressure to restrict advocacy of Taiwanese independence, a topic usually sensitive to CCP leaders. This could reflect an acknowledgment by the Chinese that such intervention in Taiwan's internal political debates may not be conducive to the long-term goals of improving the government's image in the eyes of average Taiwanese and rendering them more agreeable to reunification. Several interviewees also noted a shift in China-related coverage away from "hard news" and toward entertainment, economic development, and various forms of cross-strait cooperation.¹²⁶

While the CCP's approach has largely been "hands off," anecdotal evidence points to occasional direct pressure from Chinese officials. This has reportedly involved "hints" to executives during visits to China that certain content is not conducive to a "harmonious" relationship. In other instances, mainland officials from China's Taiwan Affairs Office are said to have made phone calls to indicate the "correct" way to report on a story.¹²⁷

Such dynamics closely match the patterns of change in Hong Kong a decade and a half ago. They signal an emerging shift in market incentives in Taiwan in which the financial sustainability and success of a media company are not determined only by its popularity within Taiwan or its journalistic standards, but at least in part by its ability to earn revenue in China and cooperate with Chinese government-aligned entities.

However, several forces are countering these pressures. Sharply attuned to the subtle transformation of the Hong Kong media environment in the 1990s, Taiwanese journalists, press freedom groups, and scholars have raised alarms at the first signs of similar encroachments on free expression in Taiwan. After a youth-driven “anti-media monopoly” movement gained momentum in 2012, two deals that would have increased the media holdings of Beijing-friendly tycoons were abandoned.¹²⁸ Regulators and government watchdogs have taken steps to establish and enforce rules governing Chinese advertising, cross-ownership, and media concentration.¹²⁹ In parallel, high readership of papers critical of Beijing has mitigated the economic impact of some of the pressures described above, and journalists have launched independent news websites hoping to fill gaps in investigative reporting left by commercialization and self-censorship at mainstream outlets.

Chinese Diaspora Media

The Chinese diaspora is one of the world's largest and most widely spread, estimated at more than 40 million people distributed in 130 countries.¹³⁰ The largest concentration of overseas Chinese is in Southeast Asia, but over the past two decades, the number of mainland Chinese moving to study, work, or settle in North America, Europe, Latin America, Africa, and Australia has grown significantly.

In 1989, the CCP became alarmed by the support the Tiananmen Square prodemocracy movement garnered among ethnic Chinese abroad. Since then, it has sought to increase its economic and political influence over these communities and the media outlets that serve them.¹³¹ A range of academic, policy, and think tank research has documented various approaches adopted by the CCP for achieving this goal, combining expansion of state-run media with efforts to influence privately owned Chinese-language outlets scattered around the world.¹³²

It is beyond the scope of this report to delve into the full complexity of diaspora Chinese media,¹³³ but three key dynamics are worth noting in the context of the present discussion.

Media Owners' Ties to Beijing

Many influential overseas Chinese news outlets are subsidiaries of Hong Kong or Taiwan-based ones. Thus, shifts to the editorial policies there can be felt far beyond the territories' borders, though editions elsewhere often adjust content to local circumstances. For owners of other overseas Chinese media, close ties with the Chinese government and state-media entities can provide various economic and political benefits ranging from preferential treatment for business initiatives in China to advertising from state-owned firms to membership in the CPPCC.¹³⁴ As in Hong Kong and Taiwan, these typically come with explicit or implicit conditions to amplify the party's messages while shying away from certain negative reporting. Scholars from Australia note that "sensitive news stories that would potentially displease the Chinese government ... are often studiously avoided."¹³⁵

For individual Chinese journalists employed at these outlets, pressures from supervisors and sometimes limited professional training constrain their reporting. Occasional calls from Chinese diplomats, the prospects of being barred from returning to China, or fear of retribution against family members in the mainland further encourage cautious writing. Thus, many of the subtle features of self-censored coverage noted in the previous section on Hong Kong are evident in diaspora media as well.

In addition to news coverage, the impact of Beijing's influence manifests in the choice of programming and commentators. Such subtle shifts have reportedly occurred even in relatively more independent outlets over the past decade. For example, Chen Pokong, a democracy advocate and political analyst based in New York, says that since 2004, a Taiwanese-owned North American paper has stopped publishing his columns; in 2010, access to his blog on a New York-based news website was blocked after it opened an office in Beijing; and since 2009, the hostess of a political talk radio show in Los Angeles has suspiciously redirected the discussion when he raised points tracing incidents of abuse or corruption to China's authoritarian political system. The causes of such changes are elusive, but they occurred despite the apparent popularity of Chen's insights among audiences. They also coincided with reported ownership changes that increased the influence of investors with mainland business interests. "As soon as a website or news outlet outside China starts to get popular, the CCP will go see how it can influence it," Chen said.¹³⁶

Manipulated Competition for Advertising

Like their mainstream Western counterparts, Chinese diaspora media—particularly the printed press—face challenges to their financial sustainability due to economic and technological changes. Businesses in the Chinese community may be reticent to advertise with outlets taking a more critical stance towards the Chinese government, either because of direct or indirect pressure from consular officials.¹³⁷ By contrast, Chen says some businesses advertise in the strongly Beijing-aligned *China Press* because they have received hints from officials that this will yield rewards for their operations in China.¹³⁸

In other cases, financial challenges confronting independent media may not be the result of Chinese political pressures but rather of unfair business practices by competitors. Jack Jia, founder of the Toronto-based semi-weekly *Chinese News*, known for its strong reporting on topics affecting the local Chinese community, contends that the circulation numbers of more Beijing-friendly Chinese-language papers are inflated, giving them an unfair advantage when obtaining revenue through advertising.¹³⁹ Unclear figures in media directories, a lack of transparency and of independent circulation audits by publications such as *Sing Tao*, *Ming Pao*, and *World Journal*, and distribution route data relayed by an industry insider who wished to remain anonymous lend credence to such suspicions. Jia attributes the cause of such practices as much to a business culture where profit trumps principle as to political motivations. But the ultimate impact is that "it [negatively] affects our ability to grow and affects our ability to serve the ... community."¹⁴⁰

State Media Content Supplanting Other Sources

A third dynamic that affects both the content of media coverage and the economic landscape for diaspora media involves state media purchasing advertorials or providing free content to Chinese-language news outlets, contributing to an overall increase in the Communist Party's ability to shape coverage of China. According to Anne-Marie Brady, a scholar of Chinese media from New Zealand:

Formerly Hong Kong and Taiwan-based news groups were the main source for news, but in the last ten years they have basically been driven out of the market by a plethora of free Chinese newspapers, which derive virtually all their content from the Mainland media. Few Chinese language newspapers outside China have the financial resources ... to resist the offer of free content. The same goes for Chinese language radio and television stations abroad, they too relay Mainland media programmes and exclude other Chinese language sources.¹⁴¹

These dynamics along with the proactive penetration of state-run outlets like CCTV into Chinese communities and cable providers around the world contribute to a situation whereby many overseas Chinese continue to get their information from news outlets directly or indirectly influenced by the CCP and its information controls. According to Wanning Sun, a media studies professor, as of 2010, CCTV controlled about 75 percent of Chinese-language television stations in North America.¹⁴² Australian scholar Feng Chongyi notes: "The 'ideological work' of the Party is so successful that ... although living in Australia, the 'new migrants' from China are still surrounded by the Chinese media dominated by the Chinese government views and narratives."¹⁴³

Still, the party's influence is far from absolute. Some local businesses continue to advertise in disfavored outlets despite the fear of reprisal. And, even when owners may have close ties to Beijing, the need to maintain credibility in a competitive market, journalists' professional dedication, and a sense of growing discontent with the government from within China prompt reporting on topics that are off-limits to mainland media, especially in the printed press. Thus, a review of recent reporting in several North American papers found excerpts from the *New York Times* story on Wen Jiabao's family assets, a special feature on the Hong Kong vigil commemorating the 1989 massacre, and a full page story on a U.S. congressional hearing about human rights in China.

Meanwhile, the more open political atmosphere of a democratic society can offset illiberal pressures and questionable business practices. Reflecting on his own evolution as a media owner, Jack Jia said: “When we started in 1993, I was also money driven and didn’t really know how a responsible media operates. But after about ten years [in Canada], I started to understand that journalism and freedom of speech are so important for a society.”¹⁴⁴

Offshore Chinese Media

As Internet and satellite television access in China has spread over the past decade and a half, Chinese activists in exile and Hong Kong have founded overseas news websites, online television stations, and e-magazines. Their goal is to use these technologies to bring uncensored news to Chinese audiences, amplify censored voices, and serve as a platform for open political and social debate.

Together, these media entities reach millions of readers and viewers in China and around the world. They are especially important and popular sources of information during times of crisis or political turmoil, when relatively more Chinese are motivated to circumvent the Great Firewall in search of uncensored content. This was starkly evident in 2012 amid the downfall of former CCP Central Committee member Bo Xilai after several early predictions by offshore media were proven accurate.

Journalist Bill Ristow noted in a 2011 CIMA report on such outlets globally that “the very best measure of impact ... might be the reactions of the governments exile media cover.”¹⁴⁵ Indeed, the CCP has responded with particular bellicosity to independent offshore Chinese media, employing various measures to limit their reach inside mainland China and obstruct nearly every aspect of their operations outside, from newsgathering to advertising to distribution. Given the party’s inability to directly dictate such outlets’ editorial line or co-opt their ownership, the Chinese authorities have often enticed foreign entities to collaborate in the media’s isolation.

To better understand these dynamics and their implications for media assistance, four entities were closely examined as case studies for this report—*China Digital Times* (CDT), *Boxun*, iSun Media Group, and New Tang Dynasty Television enabling collective analysis of their challenges to offer broad insight into the CCP’s tactics for impeding their work.

Inside China: Censorship, Landing Rights, and Harassment

When possible, Chinese officials have used their power within China to thwart these outlets’ access to Chinese audiences and punish critical reporting. The websites of all four media entities examined for this paper are blocked and content reposted on social media is often deleted.¹⁴⁶ Social media platforms have closed accounts of key people associated with the outlets, at times following explicit government directives.¹⁴⁷ In October 2011, the State Council Information Office ordered online portals, including the popular Sina Weibo microblogging service, to remove content related to iSun Affairs.¹⁴⁸ As the outlets have sought creative avenues for overcoming these impediments—such as e-mail dissemination, mirror websites, and circumvention instructions—the Chinese

authorities have refined their obstructions. “We’re constantly combatting blocking,” said Xiao Qiang, founder and director of *China Digital Times*.¹⁴⁹

For television broadcasts, the State Administration of Radio, Film, and Television (SARFT) has been responsible for blocking. In November 2009 it revoked iSun TV’s landing rights via cable distributors after permitting them in parts of China for nine years.¹⁵⁰ Staff members were given no explanation or prior warning. The suspicion is that the cutoff was reprisal for talk show episodes hosted by owner Chen Ping that covered topics such as political reform, the 1989 Beijing massacre, and the Cultural Revolution.¹⁵¹ Today, iSun remains available via satellite at many hotels and hospitals in China, but not to the broader audiences it reached before 2009.¹⁵²

Those who contribute content or assist in its dissemination within China have faced harassment, detention, and in some cases, imprisonment. According to the *South China Morning Post*, iSun’s 30 or so mainland employees and their families are regularly harassed and occasionally summoned for police questioning, causing some to quit.¹⁵³ In June 2008 a Nanjing court sentenced a Boxun-affiliated journalist to four years in prison after he reported a police beating and land dispute.¹⁵⁴ NTDTV has no in-country full-time correspondents. But, a recent crackdown on unofficial satellite dishes has ensnared at least a dozen people reportedly facing criminal

Four Offshore Chinese Outlets

The following four media entities are headquartered outside of mainland China. They are a modest but representative sample of websites, television stations, and publications founded by overseas Chinese and exile activists in recent years with the aim of providing uncensored news and analysis to Chinese media consumers.¹

China Digital Times (CDT): An English- and Chinese-language website based out of the University of California at Berkeley. A current NED grantee, CDT aggregates news related to digital media and Chinese politics. Its Chinese-language website is especially focused on tracking censorship, directing users to blocked websites, and redistributing content that has been deleted from within China’s Great Firewall. Its Chinese-language website received around 600,000 unique visitors from April to December 2012, and 48,000 from June 15 to July 15, 2013. The English site received an additional 750,000 visitors during 2012 and 63,000 from June to July 2013. CDT’s full audience is broader due to other channels of dissemination such as e-mail, mirror websites, and social media.

Boxun: A primarily Chinese-language website (with a small English language presence) that follows a citizen journalism model. Boxun often reports on human rights abuses, dissidents, and high-level CCP corruption and intrigue. The website is based in the United States, though many contributors are in China, including a large number of bloggers from among the activist community. It recently launched a monthly magazine in Hong Kong. Its Chinese-language website received 2.8 million unique visitors during 2012, and 405,000 from June to July 2013. Its full audience is broader given other channels of dissemination such as email and social media.

New Tang Dynasty Television (NTDTV): A television station headquartered in New York that broadcasts to China and to diaspora communities. It has bureaus around the world and some non-Chinese language programming. NTDTV was founded by practitioners of the Falun Gong spiritual movement, whose adherents are persecuted in

China, with the aim of producing uncensored content for Chinese audiences and promoting traditional Chinese culture. Its programs include daily news shows with original reporting, satire, cultural programming, and political talk and call-in shows. NTDTV reporting is often critical of the Chinese government, touches on sensitive human rights issues, and features interviews with dissidents in China and abroad. NTDTV's website received 17 million unique visitors from May to October 2012, and 2.8 million between June 15 and July 15, 2013. Its full audience is larger given other channels of dissemination, especially satellite and cable television.

iSun Media Group (iSun): A media group headquartered in Hong Kong that includes a satellite television station and documentary film center serving audiences in China and other parts of East Asia. Until May 2013, it published a current affairs magazine, *iSun Affairs*, that had won several awards for reporting on human rights and social unrest in China. *iSun TV* include current affairs talk shows and documentaries about political, social, and historical developments related to contemporary China, but rather than original breaking news coverage. No data was available for *iSun TV*'s website, but the station claims that millions of people in China and Southeast Asia potentially have access to its satellite broadcasts.

Endnotes

1. Website statistics cited are based on data from Google Analytics as provided by the outlets and confirmed by the author.

charges for helping neighbors install dishes to receive its programming, although they never had direct contact with the station.¹⁵⁵

Despite these risks, many mainland activists and intellectuals participate in talk shows or agree to be interviewed using their real names, partly due to the Chinese authorities' inconsistent repression. While overseas CDT staff have been questioned by the Public Security Bureau when visiting China, in May 2013, Boxun founder and U.S. citizen Watson Meng was surprised to discover he had been granted a visa to attend his mother's funeral.¹⁵⁶

Pressuring Western Companies to Block China Access

When the Chinese government lacks direct control over the means of news dissemination or the technical capacity to block content, economic "carrots and sticks" have helped co-opt foreign companies into hindering Chinese audiences' access to the outlets' content.

For example, since September 2011, Apple has removed from its iPhone and iPad China store applications for *iSun Affairs*, NTDTV, and an overseas bookstore with works on Tibet, Xinjiang, and democracy.¹⁵⁷ The only explanation, if any, that the app developers received from the tech giant was an unchallenged assertion that their content is "illegal" in China.¹⁵⁸

The most significant challenge NTDTV has faced has been finding a satellite company willing to sign a contract—and honor its commitments—to enable the station to broadcast via satellite into China, as the Chinese government has systematically pressured or enticed companies not to accept NTDTV’s business.¹⁵⁹

In at least one case, the prospect of Chinese contracts—including ones related to the global expansion of Chinese state-run media—has provided leverage for encouraging a satellite firm to block NTDTV’s broadcasts as an existing client. In 2004, when NTDTV first signed an agreement with the French company Eutelsat, the firm had no business with China. After Eutelsat began seeking out state-affiliated Chinese clients, the company stalled the renewal of NTDTV’s contract in 2005, though it was ultimately extended after an international advocacy campaign.¹⁶⁰ Two *Wall Street Journal* reporters who investigated the case at the time asserted that “Eutelsat from the outset envisioned using NTDTV as a pawn that could be sacrificed.”¹⁶¹

In June 2008, shortly before the opening of the Beijing Olympics, NTDTV’s signal into China was suddenly cut off. Eutelsat publicly blamed the disruption on technical difficulties.¹⁶² However, on July 10, press freedom watchdog Reporters Without Borders published an incriminating transcript of a conversation from late June between a Eutelsat employee in Beijing and an investigator pretending to be a CCP propaganda department official.¹⁶³ During the exchange, the Eutelsat employee admits that the technical explanations are an “excuse” and relays that the decision to cut NTDTV’s signal came from the firm’s top echelons after years of pressure from Chinese government bodies and ambassadors in Europe:

It was our company’s CEO in France who decided to stop NTDTV’s signal. We could have turned off any of the transponders. It was because we got repeated complaints and reminders from the Chinese government ... all the ministries and bureaus, whether it’s the State Administration of Radio, Film, and Television or the Ministry of Information Industry, their reply to us was... “Turn it [NTDTV] off before we can talk.”¹⁶⁴

The Eutelsat employee explicitly notes that its reason for impeding NTDTV’s broadcasts was to “show a good gesture to the Chinese government.” He then expresses exasperation that the relevant Chinese authorities have yet to respond with business contracts, especially after he reported the news of the NTDTV interruption back to the SARFT, MIIT, and Ministry of Foreign Affairs.¹⁶⁵

Since that conversation, Eutelsat has completed at least two lucrative deals with Chinese state entities. In December 2010, Xinhua signed a contract to begin broadcasting its new English-language 24-hour news channel *CNC World* to Europe, the Middle East, and North Africa via a Eutelsat satellite.¹⁶⁶ In October 2011, Eutelsat became the first Western company to cooperate with China on a launching project, sending its W3C telecommunications satellite into orbit from Sichuan Province.¹⁶⁷ Separately, in June 2012, the Chinese sovereign wealth fund China Investment Corp (CIC) purchased a 7 percent stake in Eutelsat, creating even closer official ties to the company.¹⁶⁸

Beyond this specific example, as of 2010, CCTV and other state-run channels were broadcasting on 37 different satellites. In a highly competitive industry, this opens the door for similar leverage to be applied on other companies if needed.¹⁶⁹ Fortunately for NTDTV and its viewers, satellite firms in South Korea and Taiwan have signed contracts to broadcast its programming to China, partially filling the gap left by Eutelsat's signal cut.¹⁷⁰

Cyberattacks Target Outlets and Providers

Like many Chinese activists and dissident websites, the four outlets under study face the incessant threat of cyberattacks, particularly denial-of-service and phishing attacks.¹⁷¹ This is one of their key ongoing challenges—and expenses. But particularly fierce and debilitating attacks occurred in 2011 and 2012 at politically significant times. In April 2012, at the height of the Bo Xilai scandal, a massive attack targeted not only *Boxun's* servers, but also those of its U.S.-based domain name registration company.¹⁷² In an apparent attempt to threaten the company into neutralizing *Boxun*, the attack was preceded by an e-mail urging the service provider to cut off the news website.¹⁷³

Evidence of direct Chinese government culpability in these acts is not conclusive, but the circumstances surrounding the incidents and the CCP's general hostility to these outlets hint at official involvement. Alternatively, the acts reflect the consequences of official propaganda defaming the outlets and the atmosphere of impunity surrounding such attacks, prompting hackers to take action on their own.

Intimidating Advertisers, Sponsors, and Investors

Alongside satellite companies and hosting service providers, other commercial partners of these outlets have come under pressure. Chinese officials have repeatedly urged local and multi-national businesses not to advertise with them, even when this may be in the corporations' financial interest.

Over time, the Chinese authorities have succeeded in creating an aura of untouchability around the outlets, thereby depriving them of critical sources of funding. “In the early days, Chinese officials directly pressured some multinationals to withdraw their sponsorships,” said Zhou Shiyu, vice president for NTDTV. “Once you have a few examples, word spreads of a ‘blacklist’ and others don’t want to deal with you.”¹⁷⁴

Watson Meng of *Boxun* says he has not even tried building a sales team, anticipating the hurdles it would encounter. “Any big companies in the United States won’t want to be involved with *Boxun*; even foundations have offices in Beijing,” Meng said. “China does track down who gives money [to disfavored overseas outlets]. They will get a phone call.”¹⁷⁵ Instead, in February 2013, *Boxun* launched a print magazine in Hong Kong. Meng hopes its newsstand and subscription sales will help expand *Boxun*’s presence (including among mainland Chinese tourists visiting the territory), cover its own costs, and in the long term, possibly support the website’s operation.¹⁷⁶

iSun has faced these and additional challenges, including a physical assault on its main investor. “We don’t know whether the government has directly pressured advertisers,” said a company representative who requested anonymity. “But when we talk to businessmen about advertising, they just say they think the [Chinese] government doesn’t want to see their products advertised in our magazine.”¹⁷⁷ The morning after the station’s landing rights in China were revoked in 2009, the value of its stocks reportedly fell almost 3.5 percent.¹⁷⁸ Today, Chen Ping is the sole investor. In June 2013, two club-wielding men beat him near his office in Hong Kong, causing injuries to his head, chest, and arms.¹⁷⁹ The case remains unsolved.

Obstructing Content Production

The Chinese government has also taken steps to interfere with independent Chinese outlets’ ability to produce original content. In 2011, regulators revoked iSun TV’s rights to film in China, forcing immediate cancellation of two programs in production at the time.¹⁸⁰ That same year, iSun Affairs hired as its new editor-in-chief Chang Ping, a prominent mainland journalist who had recently been forced out of his position at a liberal Guangdong paper. Chang applied for a work visa in Hong Kong, but while approval for such visas typically takes four months, two years later, Chang had not received a reply. This prompted speculation that the Hong Kong authorities were dawdling due to pressure from Beijing.¹⁸¹

Elsewhere, reporters for NTDTV and *Boxun* have been barred from events in the United States and Europe, sometimes suddenly having press passes revoked.¹⁸² In February 2012, controversy erupted when Zhao Yan, a *Boxun* correspondent who had been imprisoned in China for supplying information to the *The New York Times*, was denied entry to a joint White House press conference attended by Xi Jinping after a Chinese official recognized the high-profile dissident journalist.¹⁸³ In Europe and Canada, Chinese officials have threatened to withdraw from—or indeed forced the cancelation of—an event upon hearing that NTDTV reporters would be present after organizers refused to exclude them.¹⁸⁴

Perhaps the most extreme example of the Chinese government's efforts to obstruct reporting by independent Chinese stations at venues outside the country occurred in relation to NASDAQ's headquarters in New York. According to a leaked U.S. diplomatic cable, in January 2007, the company's representative in China, a U.S. citizen, was summoned and interrogated by the State Security Bureau about NTDTV staff reporting from its New York offices. He was released the same day but under pressure, "may have pledged to Chinese authorities that NASDAQ would no longer allow," NTDTV to report from the exchange headquarters.¹⁸⁵ Starting in February 2007, NTDTV's correspondent was suddenly barred from the building after reporting from there on a daily basis for more than a year. The station suspected Chinese pressure behind the unexpected change of heart but did not know what had happened until the leaked cable was discovered in 2012.¹⁸⁶ Soon after NTDTV's exclusion, NASDAQ received Chinese regulatory approval to open its first representative office in China.¹⁸⁷

Attempting to Discredit

Another subtle but nonetheless damaging tactic involves initiatives by the Chinese government or individuals with official ties to discredit these outlets. CDT reported that "50 cent party" bloggers have sought to defame the site on international social media platforms like Google+, though their effectiveness is impeded by the website's genuine fans voicing their support.¹⁸⁸

Boxun is facing a defamation suit filed in a California court in June 2012 by actress Zhang Ziyi over an article claiming she had sexual relations with ousted Chinese official Bo Xilai.¹⁸⁹ The website has stood by its reporting, but several developments related to the lawsuit have fueled suspicions among observers that it "has less to do with an actual case of defamation, and plenty to do with trying to make life difficult" for *Boxun* generally and Meng personally.¹⁹⁰

The CCP's attempts to discredit NTDTV have been more direct. Diplomats have published articles in overseas Chinese newspapers explicitly discouraging readers from watching the station's programming or visiting its website, while using vilifying language characteristic of the party's broader campaign against Falun Gong.¹⁹¹

Some of these efforts may be more effective than others, but collectively, they serve to deter viewers who might otherwise appreciate the media outlets' content and prompt prospective advertisers or funders to shy away.

Recent Trends

The Chinese government is investing substantial political, economic, and diplomatic resources to monitor and obstruct offshore Chinese media. Such hostility appears to increase when an outlet or program is perceived as a potential competitor to state-run media (particularly television); refuses to recognize—or directly challenges—the legitimacy of CCP rule; touches on taboo topics; or involves individuals who are otherwise considered politically sensitive.

Many of the tactics described above have been employed for some time. In considering the events of the past few years, however, four trends are notable:

- The tactics that undermine free market competition profoundly impact the financial viability of independent overseas Chinese media, hindering the quality of news reporting and at times threatening their survival.¹⁹²
- The Chinese authorities explicitly or implicitly condition foreign corporations' access to the country or to lucrative business exchanges on their willingness to shun—or more rarely, actively undermine—independent Chinese media abroad.
- Intensified obstructions—like cyberattacks—have occurred at key moments of crisis.
- Gradual, progressive efforts have been made to marginalize outlets like iSun as they become more critical of CCP rule, even if they and others perceive their reporting as relatively “moderate.”

Together, such mounting challenges hinder these outlets' ability to serve audiences inside China at a time when uncensored news and thoughtful political analysis are valuable commodities.

To date, the outlets have explored different solutions to resolve these challenges. Three of the four rely heavily on volunteers for reporting, translation, and editing. This can hinder professionalism, but facilitates their sustainability and illustrates the dedication of people inside and outside China to their mission. They have also developed creative ways of getting their content past China's censors, with CDT and NTDTV cooperating closely with circumvention tool developers and incorporating humorous content attractive to Chinese netizens.

In terms of financial sustainability, CDT has chosen a non-profit model of financing, with funding provided by various foundations (including the National Endowment for Democracy), individuals, and in-kind support by the University of California at Berkeley. *Boxun* is experimenting with a print magazine to subsidize its operations, alongside automated online advertisements, private donations, and in-kind technical support for resisting cyberattacks. iSun's owner Chen Ping has invested much of the profits from his own previous businesses to keep the media group's operations afloat. NTDTV has been able to continue thanks to private donations, fundraising events, and advertisements from local merchants less susceptible to Chinese government pressure than large multinationals.

Despite these efforts, the latter three all listed the lack of financial resources as one of the major challenges they face. The role of the CCP's pressure in hindering their ability to follow usual business models is a key factor undermining self-sustainability.

Though the size of their audience falls short of state-run outlets, these and other offshore media provide a vital source of alternative news to millions of Chinese citizens, as well as a platform for an open, in-depth exchange of ideas difficult to find within the Great Firewall. Occasionally, those involved in the outlets have an opportunity to sense the impact they may be having: "I've had university or high school classmates from China find me after they watched my show online or via satellite," said Chen Pokong, the New York-based democracy activist, who appears regularly on political talk shows beamed to China. "They are very thankful and will say things like 'you changed my mind, before I was brainwashed.'"

Recommendations

The Chinese Communist Party's transnational media controls affect news outlets around the globe in complex ways—both blatant and subtle. Nonetheless, there are forces that have proved successful in countering their impact.

Addressing a phenomenon as diverse, multifaceted, and discreet as this is challenging. The following recommendations may serve as a starting point for a more informed discussion about effective strategies for countering this emerging trend.

To Governments:

- Foreign governments should respond vociferously to assaults and visa delays of foreign correspondents holding their citizenship. They should urge proper investigation and prosecution of attackers, and follow up as necessary until a satisfactory resolution is reached.
- Foreign governments should consider diplomatic options for signaling that visa delays or denials are unacceptable for a country of China's international stature. To date, the response from Western governments to growing harassment of international media in China has often been timid.¹⁹³
- When Chinese diplomats overstep their bounds and attempt to interfere with media reporting in other countries, the host government should protest, conveying that such behavior may violate diplomatic protocols.
- In Hong Kong, the authorities should properly investigate assaults against independent media known for their criticism of the central government, including recent attacks on the owners of iSun and Next Media groups.
- In Taiwan, initiatives to strengthen media cross-ownership and concentration rules should continue to be pursued and enforced.

To Media Development Donors:

- International donors should encourage research and advocacy initiatives that track self-censorship and other subtle pressures on news media. The Hong Kong Journalists Association
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and several scholars have produced impressive frameworks and surveys for monitoring the nebulous phenomena that can be applied elsewhere. Expanding such research to Taiwan and diaspora Chinese media would be a valuable first step towards responding to the challenges self-censorship presents. Separately, a more detailed assessment of any emerging Chinese government obstructions to media in Africa, Latin America, and Asia may be warranted.

- Media development donors should consider models for funding in-depth investigative features on newsworthy topics related to China but that official impediments may render too costly or time consuming for cash-strapped news outlets to undertake at their own expense.
- Media development funders should make sure to include exile and diaspora media in funding, training, and other assistance opportunities for Chinese-language media and might consider allocating dedicated resources for these outlets separate from internal China funds. Several interviewees at such outlets acknowledged the need to improve professionalism and expressed interest in training. Those who had received previous trainings noted its help in improving journalistic standards and business knowledge.
- Funders should provide technical and financial support for responding to cyberattacks and expanding the availability of circumvention tools to Chinese users. If long-term assistance is not feasible, funders might consider creating an emergency fund that can be activated quickly during moments of crisis or political turmoil when the number of people in China seeking uncensored information typically spikes.

To Media Owners and Outlets:

- Owners of independent media outlets should stay informed about the dynamics discussed in this report and the CCP's history of using economic dependence as leverage to influence editorial content. They may consider inclusion of an arbitration clause or other protective provision in advertising and financial agreements with Chinese government entities to fend off future pressure. Diversified funding sources can also provide flexibility and protect journalistic integrity.

- When possible, media outlets should be transparent about pressures and other infringements coming from China. The recent examples of media outlets publicizing cyber intrusions provided important information to the public and policymakers. Enhanced transparency regarding circulation and ownership structures—particularly among Chinese-language media—would also help create a fairer business environment.

Endnotes

1. A number of news outlets may straddle multiple categories, but have been examined in in one or the other for the purposes of this report. Although Hong Kong is part of the People's Republic of China, its media are remarkably freer than their mainland counterparts under the "one country, two systems" arrangement. As such, they are examined in this report as media based outside of mainland China.
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8. These groups and related topics combine perceived threats to both CCP rule and China's territorial integrity, as well as past and present human rights violations whose widespread discussion in China could severely damage the party's legitimacy. Sensitivities regarding Tibet and Xinjiang typically involve challenges to official narratives about the regions' history, advocacy of their independence, independent investigations of recent unrest, and sympathetic coverage of leading figures like the Dalai Lama or Rebiya Kadeer. The party's hostility towards Falun Gong, a spiritual and meditation practice that became popular during the 1990s, dates to 1999 when then CCP head Jiang Zemin and other hardliners viewed its informal nationwide network and theistic worldview as a threat to party rule and launched a campaign to eradicate it. Since then, sympathetic portrayals of the practice, independent investigations of human rights abuses, and Falun Gong practitioners' nonviolent activism have become among the most censored topics in China. The CCP also remains highly sensitive to discussion of the 1989 Beijing Massacre, in which the military opened fire on unarmed prodemocracy demonstrators, killing between several hundred and several thousand. Movement leaders from the period who continued their activism in exile remain sensitive figures, while new generations of activists and commentators periodically run afoul of party censors, particularly when they proactively challenge one-party rule or advocate for a democratic system in China. Lastly, the Chinese government's position is that Taiwan is a province of China despite its de facto features of sovereignty. Recognition of Taiwan as an independent state internationally or calls for independence by Taiwanese

politicians typically draws a strong response. The CCP often conditions foreign aid and other cooperation on counterparts' affirmation of a "One China" position.

9. In the interests of full disclosure, the author has contributed articles and/or granted interviews to several media outlets covered in this report, including the *New York Times/International Herald Tribune*, *The South China Morning Post*, *The Liberty Times/Taipei Times*, *The Epoch Times*, and New Tang Dynasty Television.
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192. Managers at both NTD and Boxun acknowledged that the outlets could improve journalistic standards if resources allowed. iSun suspended publication of iSun Affairs magazine in May 2013 apparently due to financial difficulties.
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