

# Changing Media



# Changing China

Edited by **Susan L. Shirk**

## CHANGING MEDIA, CHANGING CHINA

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*Edited by Susan L. Shirk*

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# Changing Media, Changing China

*Susan L. Shirk*

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

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



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

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

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

China is nonetheless still a long way from having a free press. As of 2008, China stood close to the bottom of world rankings of freedom of the press—181 out of 195 countries—as assessed by the international nongovernmental organization (NGO) Freedom House.<sup>4</sup> Freedom House also gives a low

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

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

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

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

In the first twenty-four hours after Google's dramatic statement, angry and excited Netizens crowded into chat rooms to applaud Google's defense

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

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

Even partially relinquishing control of the mass media transforms the strategic interaction between rulers and the public in authoritarian political systems like China. Foreigners tend to dwell on the way the Chinese propaganda cops are continuing to censor the media, but an equally important

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

## OFFICIAL AMBIVALENCE

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

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

On the other hand, surrendering control over information creates severe political risks. It puts new demands on the government that it may not be able to satisfy, and it could reveal to the public the divisions behind the facade of party unity. Diminished control also provides an opening for political opposition to emerge. What most worries CCP leaders—and what motivates them to continue investing heavily in mechanisms to control media content—is the potential that a free information environment provides for organizing a challenge to their rule. The Chinese leaders’ fear of

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

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

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

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

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

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

## MASS MEDIA IN TOTALITARIAN CHINA

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

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

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

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

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

## MEDIA REFORM

Beginning in the early 1980s, the structure of Chinese media changed. Newspapers, magazines, and television stations received cuts in their government subsidies and were driven to enter the market and to earn revenue.

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

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

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

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

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



audiences. The Guangdong-based publications use domestic muckraking to attract a business-oriented, cosmopolitan audience. Because they push the limits on domestic political reporting—their editors are fired and replaced frequently—they have built an audience of liberal-minded readers outside Guangdong Province. According to its editors, *Southern Weekend* (*Nanfang Zboumo*), published by the *Nanfang Daily* group under the Guangdong Communist Party Committee, considered one of the most critical and politically influential commercial newspapers, has a larger news bureau and greater circulation in politically charged Beijing than it does in southern China.<sup>26</sup> The Communist Youth League's popular national newspaper, *China Youth Journal*, has been a commercial success because it appeals to China's yuppies, the style-conscious younger generation with money to spend. The national foreign affairs newspaper, *Global Times*, tries to attract the same demographic by its often sensational nationalistic reporting of international affairs, as I discuss in chapter 10.

Media based out of Shanghai, the journalistic capital of China before the communist victory in 1949, are comparatively “very dull and quiet,” according to Chinese media critics. The cause they cite is that the city's government has been slow to relinquish control.<sup>27</sup> Shanghai audiences prefer *Southern Weekend*, *Global Times*, and Nanjing's *Yangtze Evening News* to Shanghai-based papers, and Hunan television to their local stations.<sup>28</sup>

Journalists now think of themselves as professionals instead of as agents of the government. Along with all the other changes referred to above, this role change began in the late 1970s. Chinese journalists started to travel, study abroad, and encounter “real” journalists. The crusading former editor in chief of the magazine *Caijing* (*Finance and Economy*) and author of chapter 3, Hu Shuli, recalls that before commercialization, “the news media were regarded as a government organization rather than a watchdog, and those who worked with news organizations sounded more like officials than professional journalists. [But] our teachers . . . encouraged us to pursue careers as professional journalists.”<sup>29</sup> Media organizations now compete for the best young talent, and outstanding journalists have been able to bid up their salaries by changing jobs frequently. Newspapers and magazines are also recruiting and offering high salaries to bloggers who have attracted large followings. Yet most journalists still receive low base salaries and are paid by the article, which makes them susceptible to corruption. Corruption ranges from small transportation subsidies and “honoraria” provided to reporters for coverage of government and corporate news conferences to outright

corporate bribery for positive reporting and extortion of corporations by journalists threatening to write damaging exposés (see chapter 3). Establishing professional journalistic ethics is as difficult in China's Wild West version of early capitalism as it was in other countries at a similar stage of development.

Some journalists also have crossed over to political advocacy. In one unprecedented collective act, the national *Economic Observer* and twelve regional newspapers in March 2010 published a sharply worded joint editorial calling on China's legislature, the National People's Congress, to abolish the system of household residential permits (*bukou*) that forces migrants from the countryside to live as second-class citizens in the cities.<sup>30</sup> The authorities banned dissemination and discussion of the editorial but only after it had received wide distribution. At the legislative session, government leaders proposed some reforms of the *bukou* system, but not its abolition as demanded by the editorial.

## MEDIA FREEDOM AND GOVERNMENT CONTROL

All authoritarian governments face hard choices about how much effort and resources to invest in controlling various forms of media. In China, as in many other nondemocracies, television is the most tightly controlled. As Chinese television expert Miao Di explains in chapter 4, "because of television's great influence on the public today—it is the most important source of information for the majority of the population, reaching widely into rural as well as urban areas—it remains the most tightly controlled type of medium in China by propaganda departments at all administrative levels." All television stations are owned by national, provincial, municipal or county governments and used for propaganda purposes. Yet television producers must pay attention to ratings and audiences if they want to earn advertising revenue. As Miao Di puts it, "television today is like a double-gendered rooster: propaganda departments want it to crow while finance departments want it to lay eggs." The way most television producers reconcile these competing objectives is to "produce leisurely and 'harmless' entertainment programs," not hard news or commentary programs. Yet exceptions exist; Hunan television has found a niche with a lively nightly news show that eliminates the anchor and is reported directly by no-necktie journalists.

In the print realm, the government controls entry to the media market by requiring every publication (including news Web sites with original content) to have a license and by limiting the number of licenses. Only a handful of newspapers, magazines, and news Web sites are completely independent and privately financed. The rest may have some private financing but remain as part of media groups headed by an official publication and subordinate to a government or CCP entity that is responsible for the news content and appoints the chief editors. The chief editor of *Global Times*, appointed by the editors and CCP committee of *People's Daily*, acknowledged this in my interview with him: "If we veer too far away from the general direction of the upper level, I will get fired. I know that." However, there is a degree of variation. For example, magazines are somewhat more loosely controlled than newspapers, presumably because they appear less frequently and have smaller readerships. Additionally, newspapers focusing on economics and business appear to be allowed wider latitude in what they can safely report.

The publication that set a new standard for bold muckraking journalism is *Caijing* (*Finance and Economics*), a privately financed independent biweekly business magazine with a relatively small, elite readership. In chapter 3, former *Caijing* editor in chief Hu Shuli explains that "the Chinese government's control of the economic news arena, both in terms of licensing and supervision, has been relatively loose when compared with control over other news . . . [so much so that] even in the aftermath of the Tiananmen Square event of 1989, economic news was little affected by censorship, while all other kinds of news were strictly monitored and controlled." Her analysis of the emergence of financial journalism in China recognizes the path-breaking role of private entrepreneurs and professional journalists, but also credits the "reform-minded economic officials" who appreciate the importance of a free flow of information for the effective functioning of a market economy. She notes that these economic officials didn't call out the CCP Propaganda Department even when *Caijing* broke an embarrassing scandal about the Bank of China's IPO in Hong Kong at the very time when the National People's Congress was holding its annual meeting; this is considered a politically sensitive period during which the propaganda authorities usually ban all bad news. Evan Osnos, in his *New Yorker* profile of Hu Shuli, observes that the differences among senior officials on media policy may protect *Caijing*, the magazine "had gone so far already that conservative branches of the government could no longer be sure which other officials supported it."<sup>31</sup>

In 2010, Hu Shuli and most of the staff of *Caijing* resigned in a conflict with the magazine's owners over editorial control and established Caixin Media, which publishes a weekly news magazine (*Century Weekly*), a monthly economic review (*China Reform*), and a Web site (Caing.com). Caixin is the first media organization in China to establish a Board of Trustees to safeguard its journalistic integrity. *Caijing*, its reputation damaged by the mass exodus of its journalists, is seeking to recoup by publishing exciting stories such as one that urged that Hubei governor Li Hongzhong be fired if he failed to apologize for ripping a journalist's tape recorder out of her hand when she challenged him at a press conference with a question he didn't like.<sup>32</sup> The heated competition between the two media groups is likely to drive them to venture beyond business journalism with taboo-breaking stories that test the tolerance of the government.

Although China's leaders have embraced the Internet as a necessary element of the information infrastructure for a modern economy, as the size of the online public has grown, they have invested more and more heavily in controlling online content and containing its powerful potential to mobilize political opposition. The Internet offers individuals the means to learn about fast-breaking events inside and outside China, to write and disseminate their own commentaries, and to coordinate collective action like petitions, boycotts, and protests. The concept of the Netizen (*wangmin*) is laden with political meaning in a system lacking other forms of democratic participation.<sup>33</sup> As Xiao Qiang, the UC Berkeley-based editor of *China Digital Times*, observes in chapter 9, "The role of the Internet as a communications tool is especially meaningful in China where citizens previously had little to no opportunity for unconstrained public self-expression or access to free and uncensored information. Furthermore, these newfound freedoms have developed in spite of stringent government efforts to control the medium."

From the standpoint of the CCP leaders, the Internet is the most potent media threat. Young and well-educated city dwellers, whose loyalty is crucial for the survival of CCP rule, flock to the Internet for information, including information from abroad.<sup>34</sup> That is why the CCP reacted so defensively to the Google showdown and firmly refuses to permit unfiltered searches. Additionally, the Internet's capability for many-to-many two-way communication facilitates the coordination of collective action around the common knowledge of online information. There is no way for CCP leaders to predict whether virtual activism will serve as a harmless outlet for venting or a means to mobilize antigovernment protests in the street.

Government controls include the “Great Firewall,” which can block entire sites located abroad and inside China and ingenious technological methods to filter and inhibit searches for keywords considered subversive. But as Xiao Qiang notes in chapter 9, “the government’s primary strategy is to hold Internet service providers and access providers responsible for the behavior of their customers, so business operators have little choice but to proactively censor content on their sites.” In addition, human monitors are paid to manually censor content.

Ever since the Mao Zedong era, the methods used by CCP leaders to inculcate political loyalty and ideological conformity have reflected an acute awareness that peer groups have a more powerful impact on individual attitudes than authority figures. It is for this reason that every Chinese citizen was required to undergo regular criticism and self-criticism in small groups of classmates or coworkers. Today’s propaganda officials are applying this insight to their management of the information environment created on the Internet. To augment its censorship methods and neutralize online critics, the CCP has introduced a system of paid Internet commentators called the Fifty-Cent Army (*wu mao dang*). Individuals are paid approximately fifty cents in Chinese currency for each anonymous message they post that endorses the government’s position on controversial issues. Local propaganda and Youth League officials are particularly keen to adopt this technique.<sup>35</sup> These messages create the impression that the tide of social opinion supports the government, put social and psychological pressure to conform on people with critical views, and thereby presumably reduce the possibility of antigovernment collective action. The July 2009 regulation that bans news Web sites from conducting online polls on current events and requires Netizens to use their real names when posting reactions on these sites appears to have the same aim of disrupting antigovernment common knowledge from forming on the Internet.<sup>36</sup>

The large commercial news Web sites Sina.com, Sohu.com, and Netease.com are probably the second most widely used source of information in China after television, and the first place better-educated people go for their news. These sites have agreements with almost every publication in China (including some blogs) and many overseas news organizations that allow them to compile and reproduce their content and make it available to millions of readers. They are privately owned and listed on NASDAQ, but they are politically compliant, behaving more or less like arms of the government. To keep their privileged monopoly status, they cooperate closely with the State Council Information Office, which sends the managers of the

Web sites SMS text messages several times a day with “guidance” on which topics to avoid. The Information Office also provides a list of particularly independent publications that are not supposed to be featured on the front page. The news sites have opted to reduce their political risks by posting only hard news material that has first been published elsewhere in China. Although they produce original content about such topics as entertainment, sports, and technology, they never do so with respect to news events. Furthermore, with very rare exceptions, such as the 9/11 attacks, they never publish international media accounts of news events directly on the site.

Despite the CCP hovering over it, the Internet constitutes the most free-wheeling media space in China because the speed and decentralized structure of online communication present an insuperable obstacle to the censors. In Xiao Qiang’s words from chapter 9, “When one deals with the blogosphere and the whole Internet with its redundant connections, millions of overlapping clusters, self-organized communities, and new nodes growing in an explosive fashion, total control is nearly impossible.” In the short time before a posting can be deleted by a monitor, Netizens circulate it far and wide so it becomes widely known. For example, speeches from foreign leaders, like President Obama’s inaugural address, are carefully excerpted on television and in newspapers to cast China in the most positive light. Yet on the Internet you can find the full, unedited version if you are motivated to search for it. There is no longer any hope for authorities to prevent the possibly objectionable statements about China by politicians in Washington, Tokyo, or Taipei, or the cell phone videos and photographs of violent protests in Lhasa or Urumqi, from reaching and arousing reactions from the online public. Once news attracts attention on the Internet, the audience-seeking commercial media are likely to pick it up as well. Xiao Qiang argues that “the rise of online public opinion shows that the CCP and government can no longer maintain absolute control of the mass media and information,” and that the result is a “power shift in Chinese society.”

## HOW ARE THE COMMERCIAL MEDIA AND INTERNET CHANGING CHINESE POLITICS?

Like all politicians, Chinese leaders are concerned first and foremost about their own survival. A rival leader could try to oust them. A mass protest movement could rise up and overthrow them, especially if a rival leader

reaches out beyond the inner circle to lead such a movement. If leaders lose the support of the military, the combination of an elite split and an opposition movement could defeat them. The trauma of 1989 came close to doing just that. Thousands of Chinese students demonstrated in Beijing's Tiananmen Square and over 130 other cities, and CCP leaders disagreed on how to handle the demonstrations. The CCP's rule might have ended had the military refused to obey leader Deng Xiaoping's order to use lethal force to disperse the demonstrators. In that same year, democracy activists brought down the Berlin Wall, and communist regimes in the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe began to crumble. No wonder that since 1989, China's leaders have worried that their own days in power are numbered.

Because commercial journalism was still in its infancy and the Internet had not yet been built, the mass media played a more minor role in the 1989 crisis than it has since then. During the crisis, students, frustrated by what they considered the biased slant of the official press, spread the word about their movement by giving interviews to the foreign press and sending faxes abroad. One market-oriented publication, the *World Economic Herald*, based in Shanghai, faced down Jiang Zemin, then the party secretary of the city, and published uncensored reports. The restive journalists at the *People's Daily* and other official papers, with the blessing of some liberal-minded officials in the Propaganda Department, reported freely on the student movement for a few days in May. The Communist Party leaders were almost as worried about the journalists' rebellion as they were about the students' one.<sup>37</sup> After the crackdown, party conservatives closed down several liberal newspapers including the *World Economic Herald* and blamed the crisis in part on the loosening controls over the press that had been introduced by former leaders Zhao Ziyang and Hu Yaobang.<sup>38</sup>

Since Tiananmen, Chinese leaders have paid close attention to the destabilizing potential of the media. The formula for political survival that they adopted, based on their 1989 experience, focuses on three key tasks:<sup>39</sup>

- Prevent large-scale social unrest
- Avoid public leadership splits
- Keep the military loyal to the CCP

The three dicta are interconnected: if the leadership group remains cohesive despite the competition that inevitably arises within it, then the CCP and the security police can keep social unrest from spreading out of control



and the government will survive. Unless people receive some signal of permission from the top, protests will be suppressed or fizzle out before they grow politically threatening. But if the divisions among the top leaders come into the open as they did in 1989, people will take to the streets with little fear of punishment. Moreover, were the military leadership to split or abandon the CCP, the entire regime could collapse.

Though commercialization of the media and growth of the Internet have consequences across all three dimensions, today their effects are felt primarily in the efforts to prevent large-scale social unrest. As the chapters in this book describe, the media and Internet are changing the strategic interactions between leaders and the public as the leaders struggle to head off unrest and maintain popular support.

## WATCHDOG JOURNALISM: HOW TO REACT WHEN THE DOG BARKS

As noted earlier, the politicians at the top of the CCP are of two minds about whether the media and Internet prevent or encourage large-scale social unrest. On the positive side, the media and Internet provide information on problems so that national leaders can address them before they cause crises. But on the negative side, the market-oriented media and Internet have the subversive effect of facilitating collective action that could turn against CCP rule.

The elite's extreme nervousness about potential protests makes them highly responsive when the media report on a problem. The pressure to react is much greater than it was in the prereform era when the elite relied entirely on confidential internal reporting within the bureaucracy to learn about problems on the ground. Once the media publicize an issue and the issue becomes common knowledge, then the government does not dare ignore it.

Chinese journalists take particular pride in exposés that actually lead to improved governance and changes in policy. One of the earliest and best examples was the reporting about the 2003 death in detention of Sun Zhigang, a young college graduate who had migrated to Guangdong from his native Hubei Province. Qian Gang and David Bandurski, as well as Benjamin Liebman, describe in chapters 2 and 7 how the initial newspaper story published by the *Southern Metropolis Daily*, a bold Guangdong commercial newspaper, circulated



throughout the country on the major news Web sites and transformed Sun's death into a cause célèbre that sparked an emotional outpouring online. This emotional outpouring in turn inspired a group of law students to take the issue of the detention and repatriation of migrants directly to the National People's Congress. Only two months after the first article, Premier Wen Jiabao signed a State Council order abolishing the practice of detaining migrants who did not carry a special identification card and shipping them back to their homes.

Although such instances of actual change in policy are rare, public apologies by high-level officials in response to media criticism are becoming more common. In 2001, Premier Zhu Rongji became the first PRC leader to apologize to the public for a cover-up when he took responsibility for an explosion that killed forty-seven children and staff in a rural school where the students were manufacturing fireworks. Premier Zhu initially had endorsed the far-fetched explanation offered by the local officials of a deranged suicide bomber. But when, despite a blackout of the Chinese media, the accounts of Hong Kong and foreign journalists who had interviewed villagers by telephone spread in China over the Internet, Premier Zhu offered his apology in a televised press conference.<sup>40</sup>

Premier Wen Jiabao has followed the example of his predecessor. He apologized for the melamine-tainted milk and infant formula that killed six and sickened hundreds of thousands of babies. The massive food safety story was originally suppressed by propaganda authorities in the lead-up to the 2008 Olympics, but the scandal was broken by the local press in Gansu Province and the official Xinhua News Service following the games. Premier Wen also apologized for the crippling snowstorms in January 2008 that stranded millions of Chinese eager to get home for the Spring Festival break.

To deflect blame and show how responsive it is to media revelations of official negligence or malfeasance, the central government also has sacked the senior officials implicated in such scandals. The number of such high-profile firings or resignations has increased over the past decade with the growth of investigative journalism. Several good examples are described in this book.

Increasingly, officials at all levels are making a conspicuous show of their receptiveness to online public opinion. They publicize their chats with Netizens. Government agencies have opened up Web sites for citizens' petitions. Law enforcement officers have started inviting Netizens to provide infor-

mation for their criminal investigations. In one case, a creative local propaganda official who was a former Xinhua reporter invited a number of bloggers to join a commission investigating the suspicious death of a prisoner. The bloggers had ridiculed as implausible the police's explanation that the prisoner had walked into the cell wall during a blindman's bluff game among the prisoners; they thought police brutality must be the explanation. The debate died down after the commission released a report that said they knew too little to conclude what had happened and the provincial prosecutors announced the prisoner had not died during a game but had been beaten by another prisoner. The official proudly explained that he had defused the issue by showing that "public opinion on the Internet must be solved by means of the Internet."<sup>41</sup>

## MONITORING LOCAL OFFICIALS

Every government needs information about how its officials are performing their jobs in order to effectively implement its policies. The top officials of China's thirty-three provinces are appointed by the CCP central leaders in Beijing. Yet the central leaders are continually frustrated by their inability to get regional officials to follow their orders. In a rapidly growing market economy, the old top-down bureaucratic methods of monitoring local officials are no longer working. Local officials benefit more by colluding with local businesses to promote economic growth by spending on big development projects than by providing such social goods as environmental protection, health care, education, and quality food and medicine that are mandated but not fully funded by the central government. Corruption at the local level is rampant. Yet the poor provision of social goods by corrupt local officials could heighten public resentment against the government and threaten CCP rule on the national level.

Theoretically, there are several ways that Beijing could resolve the dilemma of how to oversee the performance of local officials. It could allow citizens to elect their own local leaders. It also could permit independent NGOs to monitor the performance of local leaders. A fully autonomous court system in which prosecutors put corrupt officials on trial and citizens sue for the benefits being denied them also would help. But CCP leaders have been too afraid of losing control to undertake such fundamental institutional reforms. They have chosen instead to rely on the mass media to serve as a fire alarm to alert

the center to problems at lower levels.<sup>42</sup> From their perspective, using the media looks like a less dangerous approach because they still license media outlets and appoint most of their top editors, thereby retaining some power to rein in errant outlets. Media revelations of local malfeasance also benefit the center by deflecting blame for problems away from themselves and onto local officials. The publicity appears to be working; surveys indicate that Chinese people are more critical of the performance of local officials than of central ones, in contrast to the pattern in American politics.

The center's interest in using the media to monitor local officials has been evident since the mid-1990s. CCTV, with the encouragement of the powerful propaganda czar Ding Guangen (see chapter 2), created a daily program called *Focus* (*Jiaodian Fantan*) to investigate issues at lower levels in 1994. Miao Di, in chapter 4, discusses *Focus* in some detail. The program was blessed with high-level political support, having been visited by three Chinese premiers and praised by China's cabinet, the State Council. The show attracted a wide viewership and strengthened the credibility of television news overall. However, because local officials intervened so frequently to block exposés of their misdeeds, the show now has become much less hard-hitting.

The central authorities tolerate greater press openness on the type of problems that, if left unreported and unsolved, might stir up serious popular dissatisfaction—in particular, problems with water and air pollution as well as food and medicine quality. Some national-level environmental officials have become adept at using media events such as, televised hearings on the environmental impact of important projects to mobilize public pressure on lower-level officials to comply with centrally adopted policies that are environmentally conscious. Veteran journalist Zhan Jiang describes the pattern in chapter 5, on environmental reporting: “as a general rule the center has an interest in receiving information that reduces the information gap between the center and localities regarding potentially volatile problems resulting from negligence by local officials.” However, as he illustrates with the case of the Songhua River chemical spill once journalists pull the fire alarm and alert Beijing and the public to a crisis, then the center tries to reassert control over the media to cool off public emotions and convey an image of a competent government that is solving the problem.

Recently, the central official media have been given the green light to pull the alarm on abuses by local officials. For years, reports have been circulating in the foreign human rights community and the international press about provincial and municipal governments that detain local citizens who have

come to Beijing to petition central officials about their grievances with local officials. They lock up the petitioners in illegal detention centers (“black jails”) on the outskirts of Beijing, ostensibly for “legal education,” and then ship them back home. In November 2009, the official magazine *Outlook* (*Liaowang*) broke the story of these illegal jails and the report appeared on the Xinhua Web site.<sup>43</sup>

Not surprisingly, local officials are wary of media watchdogs and do what they can to fence them out. As Tsinghua University journalism professor Li Xiguang has noted, “The central government, in the fight against the widespread corruption of the local government, encourages journalists to write exposes of the corruption. But the local governments are very much protective of themselves and of their power, so there is a conflict between the central government and the local government in dealing with journalists.”<sup>44</sup> Censorship by provincial and local branches of the CCP Propaganda Department and the State Council Information Office is viewed by journalists as tighter than that at the national level. The essays in this book offer numerous examples of local governments’ blackouts of critical news stories and the strategies journalists and activists use to evade them.

Ever since the 1990s, regional commercial newspapers have been doing investigative reporting of corruption and other abuses on the part of local officials, but only outside their own home provinces. This practice is called cross-regional reporting (*yidi jiandu*). Since all local newspapers are part of media groups belonging to the local government and CCP establishment, editors naturally are inhibited from biting the hand that feeds them. Exciting stories about the sins of other people’s officials may be second best but are better than nothing. Reporters are willing to brave police harassment or violent attacks by paid thugs to get the goods on bad governance by officials in other places. Often they don’t have to go to the scene to report the story. As Ben Liebman describes in chapter 7, journalists blocked by local bans from writing about local malfeasance can simply e-mail the information to colleagues from other regions who then write the exposé.

Complaints from provincial and municipal officials about nosy reporters pushed the CCP Propaganda Department to ban the practice of cross-regional reporting in 2004. Because the order was largely ignored, a year later provincial leaders raised the issue again, this time at the level of the Politburo.<sup>45</sup> Provincial leaders are a powerful group within the CCP, constituting the largest bloc in the Central Committee and one-quarter of the Politburo.

The interests of these leaders incline them to favor tighter restrictions on investigative journalism. As a result of their complaints, cross-regional reporting has been restricted to stories about officials at the county level or below. Only national-level media dare to publish exposés of provincial and municipal officials, and even then they usually wait until they get wind of an official investigation before reporting on the case.

Meanwhile, local officials are learning the art of spin; they hold press conferences and online chats with Netizens to present an appearance of openness and candor—for example, Chongqing Party Secretary Bo Xilai invited television cameras to broadcast live his negotiations with striking taxi drivers in 2009.

The expansion of Internet access and the growth of the Web also make it increasingly difficult for local officials to enforce media blackouts on sensitive issues. Several chapters in this book discuss the 2007 case of the Xiamen PX chemical plant, a project ultimately defeated by the mobilization of environmentally conscious public opinion that breached a local media blockade. As Xiao Qiang tells the story (chapter 9), the outcome resulted from the “gap in control between local authorities as well as between local and central authorities [that] can provide a space for Netizens to transmit information. . . . One of the most vocal advocates for the issue was the blogger Lian Yue, whose Weblog was not hosted within Fujian Province. Because officials outside Fujian, including the central government, did not share the local government’s interest in censoring news about the PX plant, Lian Yue was able to continue his Weblog and even get coverage in newspapers published outside Fujian.”

## **MEDIA CREDIBILITY AND GOVERNMENT TRANSPARENCY**

Competition from the commercial media and the Web-based media has created what Qian Gang and David Bandurski call a credibility gap problem for the official media. In chapter 2, they compare the ways stories are covered in various kinds of newspapers, vividly illustrating that commercial newspapers’ reporting is far more informative and reliable than that found in official newspapers. Readers are abandoning the official media, and their preference is heightened during crises that arouse their interest and motivate them to search for reliable information.