



CHINA'S
PURSUIT OF A
NEW WORLD
MEDIA ORDER



REPORTERS
WITHOUT BORDERS
FOR FREEDOM OF INFORMATION

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FOREWORD

A decade of Chinese media expansion

China has been going to great lengths for the last decade to establish a “new world media order” under its control, with the aim of deterring and preventing any criticism of itself. Less well known than the Belt and Road Initiative but just as ambitious, this project poses a threat to press freedom throughout the world.

China ranked 176th out of 180 countries in the 2018 World Press Freedom Index compiled by Reporters Without Borders (RSF). Dozens of journalists and bloggers are in prison for collecting or circulating information censored by the Chinese Communist Party. A system of hi-tech censorship restricts the news and information available to China’s 800 million Internet users, while a sophisticated propaganda and surveillance apparatus places additional constraints on their ability to inform themselves freely.

President Xi Jinping is forthright about being an enemy of democracy, universal values, human rights and press freedom. In his view, the duties of journalists boil down to relaying Party propaganda and “closely aligning themselves with the Party leadership in thought, politics and action”.

In the course of a harsh, five-year crackdown on journalists and bloggers, he has succeeded in imposing this totalitarian vision on his own country and is now seeking to extend it beyond China’s borders.

Over the course of the last decade, China has actively sought to establish a “new world media order” under its control, an order in which journalists are nothing more than state propaganda auxiliaries. Beijing is lavishing money on modernizing its international TV broadcasting, investing in foreign media outlets, buying vast amounts of advertising in the international media, and inviting journalists from all over the world on all-expense-paid trips visits to China. The regime even organizes its own international events as an additional way of promoting its repressive vision of how the media should function.

Through its embassies and its network of Chinese culture-and-language Confucius Institutes, China no longer hesitates to harass and intimidate in order to impose its “ideologically correct” vocabulary and cover up the darker chapters in its history. International publishing and social network giants are forced to submit to censorship if they want access to the Chinese market. In Southeast Asia, authoritarian regimes are adopting Internet control regulations based closely on Chinese legislation.

This expansion – the scale of which is still hard to gauge – poses a direct threat not only to the media but also to democracies. If democracies do not resist, Chinese citizens will lose all hope of ever seeing press freedom in their country, and Chinese-style propaganda will increasingly compete with journalism as we know it outside China, thereby threatening the ability of citizens everywhere to freely choose their destiny.



[REVEALING SIGNS OF BEIJING'S GROWING INFLUENCE]



1 - CHINA: At the opening of the fifth annual World Internet Conference in the resort town of Wuzhen in November 2018, the state-owned news agency *Xinhua* unveiled an artificial intelligence (AI) TV news anchor capable of reading propaganda news items in English – the future of journalism, in Beijing's view.

2 - UNITED KINGDOM: The Chinese state-owned TV broadcaster *CGTN* opened a production centre in London with 90 locally-hired employees in December 2018. The centre will eventually produce programmes specifically designed to disseminate Chinese propaganda in Europe, as its Washington-based centre already does for the Americas, and its centre in Nairobi does for Africa.

3 - SOUTH AFRICA: Just hours after Azad Essa's column criticizing China's persecution of its Uyghur community was published by South Africa's *Independent Online* in September 2018, all further columns by Essa were suddenly cancelled. Chinese investors have a 20% stake in *Independent Online*.

4 - SWEDEN: The Chinese embassy issued a statement in July 2018 accusing **Jojje Olsson**, a reporter for the Swedish daily *Expressen*, of "instigating hatred against China". Olsson's only "crime" was to have written an article detailing the methods that the Communist Party uses to control news and information in China.

5 - CAMBODIA: Hun Sen has employed increasingly authoritarian methods to rule Cambodia since 1985 and, with Beijing's help, recently cracked down on his country's media, which used to be among the freest in Asia. As a result, his party won all 124 seats in the 2018 parliamentary elections, compared with only 68 in the previous election.



←
When Facebook
enters China.
© MIT Technology Review

6 - VIETNAM: The cyber-security law that Vietnam adopted in June 2018, which significantly reinforces the regime's grip on the Internet, is a close replica of the one that China adopted just one year earlier.

7 - UNITED KINGDOM: Peter Humphrey, a private investigator and former journalist who was forced to make a confession on Chinese state TV in 2013, filed a complaint against *CCTV-CGTN* with the British broadcast media regulator Ofcom in November 2018, calling for its licence to operate in the UK to be revoked for "violating the broadcasting code".

8 - AUSTRALIA: In March 2018, Australia's defence department banned its personnel from installing the Chinese messaging app WeChat on their mobile phones. Unlike its rivals, WeChat is not encrypted and all of the data it processes – from message content to geolocations – is accessible to the Chinese authorities.

9 - MEXICO: In October 2018, the New York investor H&H Group, linked to Beijing-controlled television network Phoenix Television in Hong Kong, bought the Mexican radio station XEWW 690. Based in the border town of Tijuana, the station now offers Chinese-language programmes and broadcasts to the entirety of southern California, which has a large population of ethnic Chinese.

10 - USA: As a result of opposition from its own employees and from human rights organisations including RSF, Google was forced in November 2018 to suspend plans for a censored search engine called Dragonfly that was meant to enable the tech giant to re-enter the Chinese market.

[GLOSSARY]

PROPAGANDA APPARATUS TARGETING THE OUTSIDE WORLD



President Xi Jinping

Xi Jinping has been both president of the People's Republic of China and general secretary of the Chinese Communist Party since March 2013. His "Chinese Dream" doctrine, which was recently incorporated into the constitution, is at the core of China's international propaganda efforts.



Chinese Communist Party Propaganda Department (CCPPD)

The Chinese Communist Party's Propaganda Department (sometimes translated as the Publicity Department) implements the policies for targeting the outside world adopted by the Central Committee's Leading Group for Propaganda and Ideology. The CCPPD includes top Party leaders and the heads of media.



State Council Information Office (SCIO)

The State Council Information Office, which is under the Propaganda Department's control, drafts the official "positive version" of events that the media must follow, and decides what arguments should be used to rebut stories in the international media that contradict the official propaganda line.



United Front Work Department (UFWD)

The functions of this opaque branch of the Chinese Communist Party include overseeing financial transfers to foreign media (including Chinese-language media), whether for the purpose of buying advertising or acquiring shares in these media. The UFWD recently absorbed the State Council's Overseas Chinese Affairs Office.



Xinhua news agency

Closely controlled by the Party, the *Xinhua* (New China) news agency has more than 10,000 employees, publishes in 10 languages (Chinese, Japanese, Korean, Arabic, Russian, English, German, French, Spanish and Portuguese) and has 162 international bureaux, including regional centres in Hong Kong, Cairo, Nairobi, New York, Mexico City and Brussels.



China Media Group (CMG)

Officially unveiled in March 2018 and unofficially known as "*Voice of China*", the China Media Group is an international entity that is designed to combine the productive and promotional capacities of the entire state radio and TV broadcasting apparatus with the aim of enhancing global propaganda impact.



China Global Television Network (CGTN)

Formerly known as *CCTV-9* and *CCTV News*, *China Global Television Network* produces programmes in five languages (Chinese, English, Arabic, French and Russian), which are broadcast in 140 countries. *CGTN* has more than 10,000 employees in 70 bureaux and three production centres (in London, Washington, D.C. and Nairobi).



China Radio International (CRI)

Founded in 1941, *China Radio International* draws its strength from its cooperation with *China National Radio*, with which it pools resources. *CRI* has approximately 2,000 employees and broadcasts in 65 languages from more than 70 foreign radio stations in the *China International Broadcasting Network (CIBN)*.



China Daily

Founded in 1981 and published solely in English, *China Daily* targets non-Chinese people, English-speaking Chinese and the diaspora, and uses “Connecting China with the world” as its slogan. It claims a print run of 900,000 copies and a total of 150 million readers (print and online versions combined).



China Watch

Written and laid out by the *China Daily* group and targeted at international opinion leaders, *China Watch* is an advertorial supplement inserted into such prestigious newspapers as the *Wall Street Journal*, the *Daily Telegraph*, *Le Figaro*, *Handelsblatt*, *Rossiyskaya Gazeta* and *Mainichi Shimbun*. It has an estimated circulation of 5 million.



Global Times

Global Times is an ultra-nationalist tabloid established by *People's Daily* in 1993 to comment on international news. Its Chinese-language edition has a print run of 1 million copies and its English-language version, launched in 2009, has a print run of 100,000. Its website, which is produced in 10 languages, claims to have 15 million visits a day.



China International Publishing Group (CIPG)

Founded in 1949, China International Publishing Group is China's biggest foreign-language publishing house. It publishes in more than 10 languages and has 20 international bureaux. Its publications include *Beijing Review*, which was launched in 1958 and which is China's only national English-language news magazine.



Leading Hong Kong media

Certain Chinese-language media outlets in Hong Kong under Beijing's partial or full control, such as *Ta Kung Pao*, *Wen Wei Po* and *Phoenix TV*, play an important role in disseminating Chinese propaganda in overseas Chinese communities. When the Chinese e-commerce giant Alibaba acquired the English-language *South China Morning Post* newspaper in 2016, many saw Beijing's hand behind the acquisition.



Chinese diaspora media

Beijing has gained control of most of the leading Chinese diaspora media. Newspapers such as New Zealand's *Chinese Herald* and Australia's *Pacific Times*, which used to be independent and critical of the Chinese regime, are now its propaganda mouthpieces. China has also developed its own media outlets such as *Qiaobao* (China Press) in the United States to help disseminate its viewpoint in the diaspora.



Chinese embassies

China's embassies are notorious for their tendency to try to intimidate journalists and academics whose work displeases them. The ambassadors themselves don't hesitate to publicly criticize any “misinterpretation” of China's actions and to demand a right of reply.



Confucius Institutes

Launched in 2004 with funding from the culture and education ministries and the Party's Propaganda Department, the network of Confucius Institutes is tasked with disseminating the Chinese language and culture and consists of more than 500 institutes in 154 countries. A growing number of universities have had to terminate their partnerships with these institutes because they try to impose the Party's official version of history and politics .



"Little Pinks"

Unlike the "50-Cent Army" of trolls who are hired to mass produce pro-regime online comments targeting Chinese Internet users, the "Little Pinks" are a Party-coordinated network of volunteer trolls whose mission is to harass China critics on social networks. The network gets its name from the fact that most of its members are thought to be young women.



WeChat (messaging app)

The growing number of regular users of WeChat, a messaging service created by the Chinese tech giant Tencent, reached 1 billion last year. Around 100 million of its regular users are located outside China. The data collected by WeChat, which is not encrypted and is managed by servers in China, constitutes a significant censorship, influence and surveillance resource for the Chinese regime.



Sina Weibo (microblogging site)

China's second biggest social network, the microblogging website Sina Weibo, has 400 million active users. It recently announced plans to expand internationally, with the approximately 50 million overseas Chinese people as its initial target. The 100 million Chinese-language students around the world are another potential market.



Baidu (search engine)

Created in 1999, Baidu dominates the Chinese search engine market, ranks second only to Google internationally, and offers a range of similar parallel services including a clone of the online encyclopedia Wikipedia. Although notorious for collaborating with state censorship and propaganda, it has been trying to develop internationally for the last decade, so far with little success.



World Internet Conference (WIC)

Launched in 2014 and held annually in the resort town of Wuzhen, the World Internet Conference invites the international community to join in building "a shared future in cyberspace". On the pretext of promoting good Internet practices, China uses these conferences to export its censorship and surveillance practices.



World Media Summit (WMS)

Launched by China in 2009, the World Media Summit invites the entire world's media to unite in "meeting the challenges of the 21st century". China uses these summits to denounce Western media hegemony and call for the imbalance to be redressed.



BRICS Media Forum (BMF)

Launched in 2016, the BRICS Media Forum is an annual gathering of media representatives from the five emerging national economies known as the BRICS (Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa). These summits provide China with an opportunity to influence media regulations and practices in the other four countries.

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EXPORTING THE

“CHINESE MEDIA MODEL”

COMBATting “HOSTILE” WESTERN FORCES

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To combat the influence of “hostile” Western forces, Beijing is trying to establish a “new world media order” under its control, one in which journalists are shorn of their watchdog role and serve governments instead.

From the “Chinese Dream” to the Belt and Road Initiative, President Xi Jinping’s China likes to present itself as a peaceful state focused on trade and guided by the principle of fairness. At the same time, the regime’s discourse paradoxically reflects a paranoid vision in which China is the victim of persecution by “hostile forces” in Western countries that feel threatened by China’s success and use their media to try to sully its image.

Li Congjun, who used to head the state news agency *Xinhua* and is now a member of the Chinese Communist Party’s Central Committee, is the architect of this rhetoric. In an [interview](#) published in *People’s Daily* in 2013, he warned against a mercurial enemy that uses its “powerful dissemination abilities” to infuse minds with such pernicious concepts as the “China threat theory” [according to which China’s development will be at the expense of other nations] and the “China collapse theory” [that says the Chinese Communist Party is on the point of losing control and the economy is about to collapse].

As “global opinions are still dominated by Western media outlets” and China’s ability to make its own voice heard “fails to match its international standing”, Li advocated the creation of a “new world media order” to redress the imbalance. “If we cannot effectively rule new media, the ground will be taken by others, which will pose challenges to our dominant role in leading public opinion”, he said.

Death of journalism

References to “media warfare” began being included in the People’s Liberation Army strategy in 2002 but it wasn’t until 2011 that Li Congjun developed the concept of a “new world media order” in an [op-ed](#) published in the *Wall Street Journal*. The media of all countries, he wrote, had the right to “participate in international communication on equal terms” and should respect the “unique cultures, customs, beliefs and values of different nations”. Twisting a recommendation that UNESCO made in 1980, he also said that the media should ensure that they were “an active force for promoting social progress”.

Li Congjun constantly uses such terms as the “media industry” and “mass communication” but has never used the word “journalism”. This is not insignificant. By treating the media as an industry whose mission is to exercise influence on the state’s behalf, his “new world media order” abolishes the watchdog role the media are meant to play. The role of journalists is essential for the rule of law to be effective.

Without their criticism, and without their ability to question official discourse and to establish facts by investigating independently, there is no way to guarantee proper respect for individual freedoms, civil rights and human rights.

Internet under state control

When Li Congjun talks of respect for the “unique cultures, customs, beliefs and values of different nations”, he is echoing the theory of cultural relativism that grants each nation the sovereign right to define its own criteria with regard to freedoms and human rights, treating them as matters of solely domestic concern. This unacceptable philosophic position, diametrically opposed to the universality of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, is used by Beijing to justify its human rights violations and to absolve the dictators with which it does business.

This doctrine is also the basis of the concept of “cyber sovereignty” or “Internet sovereignty”, according to which each government must be able to regulate online content within its own territory. In China’s repressive vision of a “new world media order”, it is clearly hard to accept that the Internet still represents an area of freedom. To export their vision, the Chinese authorities have gone so far as to create several specific international events such as the World Media Summit, launched in 2009, and the World Internet Conference, held annually since 2014.

Defending his repressive online policies in an [interview](#) for the *Wall Street Journal* on 22 September 2015, President Xi Jinping argued that the “rule of law also applies to the Internet” and that nations have to safeguard their “sovereignty, security and development interests” as much online as in the real world. In a world grappling with online disinformation and harassment, this position might at first appear legitimate. But, three years later, it is clear that harsher Internet regulation in China has not benefited its citizens and has instead just facilitated propaganda, censorship and social control.

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A philosophy radically opposed to that of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights
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President Xi Jinping justifies his repressive policy by arguing there is a need to subject the Internet to the “rule of law” and to show respect for the “sovereignty, security and development interests” of the nation.

© Photo: Economist / Satoshi Kamabayashi



“MADE IN CHINA” MEDIA EVENTS

To achieve the desired “new world media order”, Beijing has created international events under its control, using them to promote its repressive vision of the media and journalism.

Since 2003, Internet governance has in principle been debated at World Summits on the Information Society (WSIS) organized by a UN agency. China attended these meetings but its influence has been limited compared with that of the United States, which has always been present in all areas of Internet management and has always energetically defended a liberal approach to the flow of information online. Until recently, Beijing only had power over its domestic Internet infrastructure. But in the last few years, it has actively promoted its model with foreign governments and in international forums. And, alongside Russia and other authoritarian regimes, it has above all been using the International Telecommunication Union as a platform.

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↑ Apple CEO Tim Cook at the 4th World Internet Conference in Wuzhen.

© AFP

Traditionally, China also had no more than a very limited role in international media meetings. This has been the case, for example, with the Web Summit, an annual event organised by an Irish company that describes itself as the world's biggest gathering of journalists, with more than 2,500 participants from such media outlets as Bloomberg, the *Financial Times*, *Forbes*, *CNN*, *CNBC* and the *Wall Street Journal*. It emphasizes professionalism and editorial freedom – values diametrically opposed to those of the Chinese Communist Party. Similarly, the annual World News Media Congress, held for the 70th time in Portugal in June 2018, awards a press freedom prize called the Golden Pen of Freedom – a feature that clearly does not appeal to Beijing's leaders.

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Internet surveillance
device displayed at
the 4th World Internet
Conference in Wuzhen.
© AFP



A world media summit devised by Xinhua

Against such a background, it is not surprising that China decided to organise its own international events in order to promote its authoritarian vision of the news media. In 2009, it created the World Media Summit, which – as its name fails to suggest – is entirely designed, organised and funded by the Chinese state news agency *Xinhua*. The first summit had prestigious international partners: *News Corp* (USA), the *Associated Press* (USA), *Thomson Reuters* (UK), *ITAR-TASS* (Russia), *Kyodo News* (Japan), *BBC* (UK), *Turner* (USA) and *Google* (USA).

The second summit, which set itself the task of “Meeting Challenges of the 21st Century”, was held in Moscow in 2012 with 213 international media organisations from 102 countries represented. And the Qatari TV broadcaster *Al Jazeera* organized a third one on “The Future of News and News Organizations” in Doha, the capital of Qatar, in March 2016 with 120 organisations and 100 media outlets represented. Held in countries that are authoritarian and reject press freedom, these summits provided China with an opportunity to promote its concepts of “positive reporting” and a “new world media order”. They also helped to legitimize *Xinhua* by allowing its leaders to debate on equal terms with international media with a reputation for producing objective, quality journalism.

Since 2016, China has also been organising the annual BRICS Media Summits for news organisations from the five emerging national economies known as the [BRICS](#) (Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa). They have allowed China to influence media regulations and practices in the four other countries, as well as provide additional opportunities to denounce Western media hegemony and call for “imbalances” to be corrected.



←
The BRICS Media Summit, an opportunity
for the Chinese regime to denounce
the hegemony of Western media.

© Gulshan Khan / AFP / Pool

World Internet Conference

In 2014, China launched the World Internet Conference (WIC), an annual event organized in the resort town of Wuzhen (in Zhejiang province) by the Cyberspace Administration of China (CAC), the agency that controls China's Internet. Behind the WIC's official goal, which is to debate Internet governance, China is aiming to promote the concept of cyber sovereignty, according to which every government is free to manage the Internet as it sees fit within its own borders – a concept that opens the way to all kinds of abuses, especially in authoritarian countries.

Blithely indifferent to the obvious contradiction, the authorities suspend China's Great Firewall around the site of the conference while it is taking place to allow foreign visitors to use websites such as Google, YouTube, Twitter and Facebook, which are normally blocked in China. But the censorship remains. When Jimmy Wales, the founder of the collaborative encyclopedia Wikipedia (also blocked in China), gave a speech in 2015, significant sections were omitted in the transcription provided by the Chinese state media.

The fourth World Internet Conference, in December 2017, was particularly successful for China thanks to the presence of around 1,000 Internet entrepreneurs, including Apple CEO Tim Cook, Google CEO Sundar Pichai and vice presidents from Facebook, Microsoft and LinkedIn.

But the fifth WIC, in [November 2018](#), was clearly a setback for Beijing, with just one speaker from Silicon Valley and a much sparser foreign presence in general. The tech giants are courting China and its markets more than ever, but their executives appear to have realised the dangers of rubbing shoulders publicly with an authoritarian regime that practices large-scale censorship, propaganda and surveillance and openly tries to export these practices to the rest of the world.

CENSORSHIP AND SURVEILLANCE: SUCCESSFUL EXPORTS

From consumer software apps to surveillance systems for governments, the products that China's hi-tech companies try to export provide the regime with significant censorship and surveillance tools.

Ever since Google withdrew from the Chinese market in 2011 to avoid complying with censorship demands, the success of Chinese hi-tech companies has been closely linked to their cooperation with state censorship and surveillance. In May 2018, the companies were enlisted into the China Federation of Internet Societies (CFIS), which is openly designed to promote the Chinese Communist Party's presence within them. Chinese hi-tech has provided the regime with an exceptional influence and control tool, which it is now trying to extend beyond China's borders.

Baidu, which is China's leading search engine and number two in the world, launched a Japanese-language version in 2008, but abandoned the project in 2013 after users discovered that it was secretly storing certain content on servers in China. Baidu tried again in Brazil in 2014, with a Portuguese-language version called Busca that filtered out terms censored in China. After objections, Baidu eliminated the censorship from Busca (although it has the technical capacity to restore it at any time). But Busca is a commercial flop, with barely 0.01% of the Brazilian market, a drop in the ocean compared with Google's 97%. Versions in Arabic (for Egypt), Thai and Indonesian have also been launched without significant success.

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Promote its concepts of “positive journalism” and “new world media order”

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Hi-tech, a powerful tool for influence and control

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Baidu nonetheless won a somewhat significant victory in the United States in 2014, when it obtained legal recognition of its right to censor. In a class action suit brought against Baidu by a group of US pro-democracy activists, a US federal court in the southern district of New York ruled that it was not illegal for Baidu to delete items from its search engine results because, in so doing, it was simply exercising a form of “editorial judgment”.

Unencrypted messaging



WeChat, the instant messaging app launched by Chinese tech giant Tencent in 2011, has had more international success. In March 2018, it claimed to have 1 billion subscribers, of whom 10% (100 million) were outside China, mainly in Southeast Asia. In an Amnesty International [ranking](#) of consumer messaging apps according to how well they protect online privacy, WeChat came last, with a score of 0 out of 100. Unlike its US rivals Facebook Messenger and WhatsApp and its Japanese and Korean rival Line, WeChat does not provide end-to-end encryption. In fact, all WeChat messages pass through Tencent’s China-based servers and are thereby accessible to the Chinese authorities.

WeChat’s functions include payments, geolocation and microphone and camera activation, which increase its potential as a security risk. In 2015, Apple included WeChat in its list of iPhone apps that had been infected with XcodeGhost, malicious code suspected of enabling remote access to certain mobile phone functions. Many journalists and human rights activists have been convicted in China in recent years on the basis of “evidence” extracted from their WeChat accounts. The Indian defence department has put WeChat on a list of apps that are regarded as dangerous. The Australian defence department has done the same.

In November 2017, Tencent invested no less than 2 billion US dollars (1.76 billion euros) in the US multimedia messaging and photo-sharing app Snapchat, increasing its capital share to 12%. Tencent’s involvement is disturbing, given that one of the core features of this app (which is censored in China) is protecting users’ privacy by allowing them to exchange messages, photos and videos that automatically disappear within seconds of being viewed.

Huawei under fire

With 18,000 employees in 170 countries, the Chinese telecom equipment and consumer electronics manufacturer Huawei already holds 15% of the world’s smartphone market – second only to Samsung (20%) and ahead of Apple (12%) – and aspires to become the world’s leader in its field. This is a disturbing ambition, given that the company was created by a former People’s Liberation Army engineering officer and questions have repeatedly been raised about its very close relationship with the Chinese state. A key partner in Chinese Internet censorship and in the persecution in Xinjiang province, Huawei has also been accused of installing a “backdoor” in some of its products that allows secret access to data, and of providing its surveillance technologies to the Iranian regime. At the start of 2019, many countries, including the United States, Canada, United Kingdom, Australia, Germany, Norway and Japan, were considering banning the use of Huawei telecom equipment on national security grounds.

In November 2018, Huawei launched a “Smart City Solution”, an urban population surveillance service that is supposed to protect the public by means of a network of cameras and data collection sensors. The service has already reportedly been sold to 120 cities in 40 countries including Zambia and Pakistan, which are both positioned

↑ WeChat, a Chinese messaging app claiming 1 billion users, has many functions that increase its potential as a security threat.

© Anthony Kwan/Bloomberg

in the lower half of RSF's World Press Freedom Index. In the wrong hands, these Chinese surveillance systems facilitate all kinds of abuses and therefore pose a serious threat to journalists and their sources, and to all those who defend unfettered information.

Ubiquitous threat

Chinese hi-tech services are being exported more and more. The microblogging service Sina Weibo, China's second biggest social network with 400 million active users, announced last November that it intends to expand internationally, with the approximately 50 million overseas Chinese as its initial target. Alibaba, China's Amazon equivalent, has just brought the United States into its online payment service Alipay, which claims to have 500 million users worldwide and which can easily be used for surveillance purposes.

China's ubiquitous technology even contaminates hi-tech companies in other countries. In August 2018, the world learned that Google was recommending that victims of hacking attempts should buy a USB security key that turned out to have been manufactured by Feitian Technologies, a Chinese company that works closely with the People's Liberation Army. If Chinese journalists followed Google's advice, their notes, messages and contact details may have been sent to the regime's security apparatus without their knowledge.

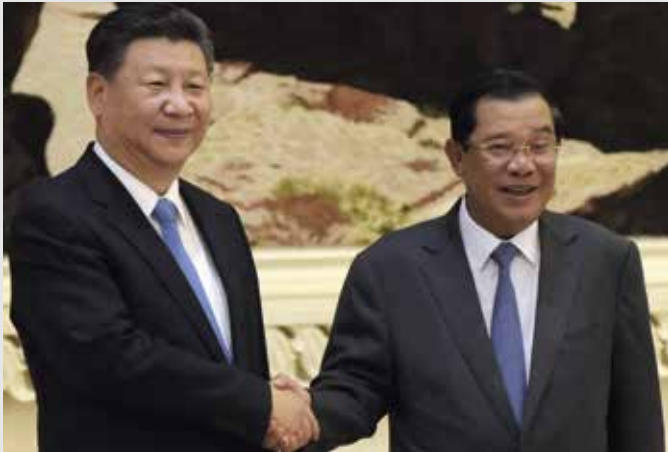
Draconian regulations

Ranked 175th out of 180 countries in [RSF's World Press Freedom Index](#), Vietnam adopted a "cybersecurity" law in June 2018 that radically tightens the government's grip on the domestic Internet. It requires international Internet companies to store their data on Vietnamese citizens on servers located in Vietnam and to open offices in Vietnam that are subject to local regulations. It also allows the authorities to prosecute citizens for posting content that "propagandises, urges, campaigns, threatens, causes division [or] entices people to gather and cause disruption".

The law's provisions closely resemble those in a law adopted by China just the previous year, and this is no coincidence given reports of close cooperation between Chinese and Vietnamese officials on the issue. Thailand, ranked 140th in RSF's Index, adopted a similar "Computer Crime Act" in 2016 and is preparing an even more repressive version of the law that could take effect this year. Cambodia, ranked 142nd, is preparing a detailed law based on the Chinese model after eliminating media pluralism and tightening restrictions. Various African countries such as Uganda (117th), Zambia (113th) and Tanzania (93rd) are in the process of adopting similar legislation as a result of their close cybersecurity partnerships with Beijing.

To export its authoritarian model, China has also been organising two-week seminars on cyberspace management in recent years, at which officials from like-minded countries are trained in "big data public opinion management systems" – in other words, how to use new technology for propaganda and surveillance. China has even created a training centre near the Vietnamese border that is used for training officials from neighbouring countries.

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China exports regulations that facilitate Internet control
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← China has encouraged Cambodian Prime Minister Hun Sen to constrain independent media in his country.

© Tang Chhin Sothy / AFP

Cambodia aligns its media with China's

With help from Beijing and from the Chinese media, Cambodian strongman Hun Sen has subjugated his country's press, once among the freest in Asia.

Lim Chea Vutha, the 38-year-old CEO of *Fresh News*, the news website he founded in 2014, gushes with enthusiasm: "As a Cambodian citizen, I declare that I support China, I support Chinese investment in Cambodia." Although it claims to be independent, *Fresh News* has grown rapidly by providing the country's strongman, Prime Minister Hun Sen, with a propaganda platform. Its articles expounding conspiracy theories and denigrating the opposition and NGOs are very similar to what can be read in *People's Daily*. And for international coverage, *Fresh News* simply uses the dispatches provided by the Chinese state news agency *Xinhua*.

Fresh News is not the only Cambodian media outlet to work with the Chinese media. In September 2017, the interior ministry launched *NICE TV*, a television channel funded in part by public funds but controlled by NICE Culture Investment Group, a Chinese company. Broadcasting Khmer-language coverage of crime, law enforcement and social issues, *NICE TV* makes no effort to hide its pro-Beijing slant.

China has launched many infrastructural projects in Cambodia in recent years and is counting on Hun Sen, who has ruled the country since 1985, to maintain the "social stability" that is supposed to guarantee a return on its investments. When Hun Sen disbanded the main opposition party, exposing Cambodia to international sanctions, he could count on China to make up the shortfall. China has also encouraged the steps he took to silence the independent media. Although it was ranked 71st in RSF's Press Freedom Index in 2002, Cambodia dropped to 142nd rank in the 2018 Index.

In April 2017, Beijing and Phnom Penh signed an agreement on "information cooperation" that included training in online censorship and surveillance. The following month, a Malaysian businessman bought the English-language *Phnom Penh Post* newspaper in an operation widely thought to have been orchestrated by Beijing. In the summer of 2017, the authorities suddenly ordered *Cambodia Daily*, the country's last independent daily, to pay a colossal amount in supposed back taxes. It was forced to close on 3 September 2017, just hours after opposition leader Kem Sokha was arrested on a treason charge.

In parliamentary elections supervised by China on 29 July 2018, Hun Sen's party received nearly 75% of the votes cast and won all 124 seats, compared to only 68 in the previous elections. This implausible result did not disconcert the Chinese Communist Party. On the contrary, China's ambassador to Phnom Penh offered heartfelt congratulations, a gesture repeated only by Laos, Thailand and Myanmar.

DISINFORMATION AND HARASSMENT: CHINESE-STYLE “SHARP POWER”

Unlike “soft power”, a term that implies relations that are mutually beneficial, China makes excessive use of its “sharp power”, a set of aggressive practices that include disinformation and harassment.



↑ A Taiwanese diplomat in Osaka fell victim to a campaign of disinformation accusing him of failing to protect citizens stuck at Kansai airport during a typhoon, and consequently committed suicide.

© AFP

Typhoon Jebi, which hit the city of Osaka in central Japan with torrential rain and winds of up to 177 kph on 4 September 2018, was the most powerful typhoon to make landfall in Japan for 25 years. Kansai International Airport was flooded and had to close for two days. In nearby Taiwan, reports circulated that Taiwan’s representative office in Osaka had done nothing to help the Taiwanese citizens trapped at the airport, leaving the Chinese embassy to rescue them. This triggered protests against President Tsai Ing-wen, whose party opposes rapprochement with China. Taiwan’s dismayed representative in Osaka, Su Chii-cherng, a 61-year-old diplomat who had been in post for only a few months, committed suicide on 14 September.

It later emerged that the reports were false. The Taiwanese tourists trapped at the airport had been immediately evacuated by the Japanese authorities, and China’s embassy had played no role in their rescue. Beijing had been involved, but in another way: it seems to have been responsible for the initial false report, as part of a carefully coordinated and extremely effective disinformation campaign. The Taiwanese authorities established that the initial report came from a “[content farm](#)” in mainland China. Posted on the sites of Chinese propaganda media such as *Global Times* and *Guancha.cn* and on the Taiwanese social media site PTT, the report was then picked up and amplified by the Taiwanese media without being fact-checked.

Social media: new battleground

Beijing has been targeting Taiwan with disinformation campaigns for decades, with the aim of undermining its authorities and facilitating a future reunification. However, it is only recently that social networks have enabled these activities to have a viral impact. In the last few years, the Taiwanese government and media have exposed many examples of Chinese disinformation campaigns on a wide range of subjects, including pension reform and the validity of a Taiwanese passport abroad.

Although Taiwan has always been the primary focus of these disinformation campaigns, Beijing has also targeted other countries with a large population of ethnic Chinese, most notably Singapore. When Singapore was preparing to take over the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) presidency in 2016, China waged a disinformation campaign designed to convince public opinion that it would be counter-productive to oppose Beijing's agenda in the South China Sea, where several countries have competing sovereignty claims over small uninhabited islands. According to the Singaporean academic and former diplomat Bilahari Kausikan, Beijing's goal was to get Singaporeans to put pressure on their government to align the city-state's interests with China's. Singaporean officials also suggested the Chinese messaging service WeChat played a role in spreading the disinformation.

In the United States, a study by the Columbia University School of Journalism revealed that there is a great deal of far-right misinformation and conspiracy theories on the US version of WeChat, which is mainly used by Chinese-speaking first-generation immigrants. Meanwhile, in Canada, WeChat initially censored news of the arrest on 1 December 2018 of Huawei chief financial officer and deputy chairwoman Meng Wanzhou for allegedly defrauding various financial institutions in violation of US-imposed bans on dealing with Iran.

Ambassadors at the forefront

China's diplomatic missions are another source of pressure on freedom of information in democracies. Some of China's ambassadors have no qualms about openly denigrating journalists or demanding the right of reply when they think they can claim – and they often do – that a newspaper article has “hurt the feelings of 1.4 billion Chinese people”. Such claims about the feelings of Chinese citizens are more than a slight exaggeration given that 97% of China's 800 million Internet users have no access to foreign media because of censorship.

An exceptionally irate statement on 3 July 2018 from the Chinese embassy in Stockholm, headed by ambassador Gui Congyou, accused **Jojje Olsson**, a reporter for the Swedish daily *Expressen*, of “instigating hatred against China” by writing an article criticizing the methods used to suppress freedom of information in China. Olsson is accustomed to being harassed by the Chinese authorities. After being based in China for nine years and writing a critical book about the country, his visa renewal was denied in July 2016, with the result that he was effectively expelled.

The Australian newspaper reported in 2017 that Apple had stopped advertising in *Vision China Times* and the *Epoch Times*, two Chinese-language publications based outside China, because of political pressure from Beijing. *Vision China Times* owner Don Ma said ten of his advertisers had been threatened by Chinese officials to get them to stop placing ads in the newspaper.

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**Demanding
the removal of
content that
“hurts the
feelings of 1.4
billion
Chinese”**
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Journalists summoned

In Canada, journalists complain of similar pressure from Chinese diplomatic circles. Gao Bingchen , a journalist writing under the pen-name Huang Hebian, lost his column in the *Global Chinese Press* , a Chinese-language newspaper based in British Columbia, in 2016 after the publication of an article criticizing China's foreign minister. Toronto-based journalist Helen Wang was fired as editor of the *Chinese Canadian Post* in 2015 after writing a critical column about the Chinese government.

The Chinese government's influence in the United States is such that even the personnel of state-funded *Voice of America's* Mandarin service are sometimes summoned to embassies and consulates to be dressed down by diplomats. An interview by Sasha Gong Xiaoxia , the head of the Mandarin service, with Chinese dissident Guo Wengui (also known as Miles Kwok), which was being broadcast live on the VOA website on 19 April 2017, was cut short as a result of pressure. Gong and four other journalists were later fired because of the interview.

Gangster methods

The harassment sometimes takes more threatening or violent forms, characteristic of gangsters. In Australia, Charles Sturt University academic Clive Hamilton reported in 2017 that, due to fear of Chinese reprisals, the publishing house Allen & Unwin had cancelled plans to publish his book, entitled *Silent Invasion*, about Chinese Communist Party activities in Australia. Anne-Marie Brady , an academic at the University of Canterbury in Christchurch, New Zealand, reported in November 2018 that she had been the target of a series of presumed harassment attempts including break-ins at her home and her office in the university and tampering with her car. The harassment began after she posted an [article](#) entitled "Magic Weapons", about China's political influence activities in New Zealand, on the website of the Wilson Center think tank in the United States in November 2017.

Beijing also uses physical intimidation to silence dissidents, including beyond its borders. Li Yuan , the chief technical officer at the Chinese-American newspaper the *Epoch Times*, was attacked and beaten in his Atlanta home in 2006 by suspected Chinese agents who took his two laptops. Xiao Qiang , the founder and editor of *China Digital Times*, an independent news website based at the University of Berkeley, reported in 2018 that his staff had been the target of repeated hacking attempts and that he had been harangued by a diplomat at the Chinese consulate in San Francisco. Toronto-based freelance journalist Xin Feng received death threats in 2016 after criticizing China's prime minister in an article, while a Chinese-Australian cartoonist who uses the pseudonym Badiucuo had to cancel an exhibition in Hong Kong in November 2018 after receiving threats.

US-based journalists with *Radio Free Asia's* Uyghur-language services reported in 2018 that the Chinese authorities had arrested dozens of their relatives in China after *Radio Free Asia* ran a detailed exposé about China's persecution of the Uyghur community in the western province of Xinjiang. And then there is the notorious case of Gui Minhai , a Chinese-born Swedish publisher who was kidnapped in Thailand in 2015 and was still detained in China as of early 2019.

2 CHINESE PROPAGANDA IN THE 21ST CENTURY

JOURNALISTS DOING THE PARTY'S BIDDING

After taking the helm in March 2013, President Xi Jinping took just a few years to restore a media culture worthy of the Maoist era, one in which journalists are openly told that their job is to serve the Communist Party.

At the opening of the fifth annual World Internet Conference in the resort town of Wuzhen in the eastern province of Zhejiang on 9 November 2018, the state-owned news agency *Xinhua* unveiled an artificial intelligence (AI)-simulated TV news anchor reading the news on a giant screen. With the physical appearance of a real, well-known Chinese anchor, this virtual presenter can read the news in English or Chinese, moving his lips in such a realistic way that he could almost be mistaken for a real person if it weren't for the fact that his elocution is slightly mechanical.



↑ For the Beijing regime, the 21st century television presenter is not a journalist responsible for his editorial decisions, but a digital image designed to deliver propaganda messages.

Wrongly presented as “a world premiere” in the field of AI, the robot in fact lacks any neurons and is only capable of reading pre-prepared scripts. It was nonetheless chilling to hear *Xinhua* announce that this virtual news presenter had “officially become part of the *Xinhua* reporting team” and would help to provide Chinese viewers with “authoritative, timely and accurate news and information”.

In other words, robots are Beijing’s ideal TV news anchors. Not professional journalists who follow news developments closely, take their own editorial decisions, verify information and put the news in perspective, but cogs in the machine, computer programs with no conscience or feelings that just read out the news reports prepared by the Propaganda Department.

Moulding the people

The role of journalists in China is spelled out in a [propaganda manual](#) for Chinese Communist Party members. It explicitly describes them as tools in the service of the state whose job is “to mould generation after generation of new socialist people”. The manual adds that, when reporting the news, the media “should hold to the positiveness principle by handling properly the balance between praise and exposing problems” – a euphemism for the reality of permanent self-censorship.

Although Article 35 of China’s constitution says that “citizens of the People’s Republic of China enjoy freedom of speech [and] of the press”, in practice they have never fully enjoyed this right. In the euphoria of an unprecedented economic boom during Hu Jintao’s two terms as president from 2003 to 2013, the Chinese media were permitted a few small pockets of freedom. Some tried to conduct investigative journalism and allow different viewpoints to be expressed. The leading pioneer was the Guangzhou-based newspaper *Southern Weekly* (*Nanfang Zhoumo*), which was well known for being outspoken.

The scandal of the “AIDS villages” in 2001, when the world learned that 2 million rural inhabitants who sold their blood to survive had been infected with HIV/AIDS through negligence, and the SARS (Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome) epidemic in 2003 that killed 774 people, mainly in Asia, were covered and debated in the Chinese media. Even the politically orthodox *Global Times* published stories with a progressive approach to such subjects as official corruption, rural poverty and discrimination against sexual minorities.

Xi Jinping ended this limited liberalization when he took over in 2013. Although his family was a victim of Mao’s Cultural Revolution, the new president set about restoring a media culture worthy of the Maoist era. Under the cover of a “crackdown on online rumours” that was later extended to “vulgar” content, Xi quickly reined in professional journalists while carrying out a tough, parallel crackdown on non-professional journalists and bloggers.



↑ President Xi Jinping quickly brought media organizations under close control while simultaneously cracking down on non-professional journalists and bloggers.

© Greg Baker / AFP

“
Xi Jinping
is restoring
a media
culture worthy
of the Maoist
era.

”

“Be positive”

On 19 February 2016, amid a slowdown in the Chinese economy and an increase in social tension, President Xi staged an inspection tour of the country's three biggest media organisations – the broadcaster *CCTV*, *People's Daily* and the news agency *Xinhua*. Journalists and other staff were “invited” to warmly applaud as he passed through.

The president had just announced a major overhaul of the media with the aim of reinforcing control by the Chinese Communist Party, which he heads. The state media, Xi reminded them, must not just follow the Party's leadership, but must also “reflect the Party's will, safeguard the Party's authority, and safeguard the Party's unity”. And, demanding absolute loyalty, he added that media “must have the Party as their family name”.

Willingly or not, Chinese journalists have carried out Xi's words to the letter, sometimes to the point of caricature.

During a mass event to promote sport and hygiene in August 2017, a young reporter from the *Southern Metropolis Daily* publicly drank three glasses of water from the Zhujiang River to show that China's water is clean and drinking it poses no danger. Broadcast live on social networks, this gesture was widely criticized as irresponsible because the river is extremely polluted, to the point that dead rats and pigs are often seen floating on its surface.

During an event on the “erosion of freedom” in Hong Kong under Chinese rule that the UK's ruling Conservative Party organized in Birmingham in September 2018, **Kong Linlin**, a reporter from state broadcaster *CGTN*, got “carried away” by her patriotism to the point that she insulted a human rights activist and slapped a Conservative Party delegate who had asked her to leave.

Suppressing news

Both state and privately-owned media are required to follow the Party's instructions, which include instructions on the vocabulary to use when covering “sensitive” subjects such as Taiwan, Hong Kong, Tibet, Xinjiang, the Tiananmen Square massacre, corruption, social unrest and dissidents. The Party's Propaganda Department (sometimes translated as Publicity Department), which oversees the activities of 14 ministries, sends notices to the media every day. This includes a list of stories to be highlighted and a list of stories to be avoided on pain of sanctions.

When President Xi Jinping's brother-in-law and former Prime Minister Li Peng's daughter were among those named in the Panama Papers investigation into the creation of offshore shell companies to conceal wealth and avoid taxes, the Party sent this notice to Chinese media on 4 April 2016: “Find and delete reprinted reports on the Panama Papers. Do not follow up on related content, no exceptions. If material from foreign media attacking China is found on any website, it will be dealt with severely.”

Ideological supervision

Reporters and editors are subject to ideological monitoring and are required to attend training sessions organized by the Party. In theory, investigative reporting is still possible in the privately-owned media but, in practice, only subjects expressly approved by the Party can be investigated. Journalists no longer have the right to a personal blog, which they had previously been able to use to tell the public about stories their editors had censored.

Since 2017, journalists have also been banned from quoting information from social networks if it has not been “confirmed” by the authorities. Even foreign media outlets based in China are no longer able to freely post content online. All content constituting news must be approved by the authorities before being posted. In a sign of the times, the term “media workers” is now often used instead of “journalists” in official statements, even those by the All-China Journalists Association (ACJA).

Internet users forced to censor themselves

Even for ordinary citizens, the Internet is no longer the area of freedom that it was a decade ago. Regulations that took effect in June 2017 threaten the very existence of citizen journalism because any service posting news and information online must first register with the authorities. This could also apply to comments or videos. It is an effective way of intimidating Internet users, especially as the administrators of online groups and forums are now criminally responsible for all comments that are posted.

The gradual closure of services providing access to foreign Virtual Private Networks (VPNs), which can be used to circumvent the Great Firewall, and a ban on anonymous online comments mean that the last holes in the wall are being sealed. Online surveillance now directly threatens every Internet user. Since the rules were tightened, several Internet users have received prison sentences for posting ordinary comments.



← Since the rules were recently tightened, several Internet users have already received prison sentences for private online comments.

© Greg Baker / AFP

Erosion of press freedom in Hong Kong

Even in Hong Kong, a special administrative region that is supposed to enjoy a separate status until 2049, press freedom is now in retreat (see [RSF's 2016 report](#) *The invisible hand on Hong Kong's media*). Ranked 18th in RSF's World Press Freedom Index in 2002, this former British colony has fallen to 70th in the 2018 Index.

The Communications Authority, which regulates Hong Kong's media, pressures them in various ways, including threatening not to renew their licences. More than half of Hong Kong's media owners, most of whom have major business interests in mainland China, are also members of political bodies on the mainland such as the National People's Congress and the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference. The Chinese Communist Party's Liaison Office in Hong Kong controls – partly or entirely – several media outlets in the territory including two daily newspapers, *Ta Kung Pao* and *Wen Wei Po*. Keung Kwok-yuen, the editor of the daily *Ming Pao*, was summarily fired on 20 April 2016, just hours after running a story about local figures named in the Panama Papers investigation.

The English-language South China Morning Post, a venerable Hong Kong institution created in 1903, was bought by the Chinese Internet commerce company Alibaba in 2016. Since then, several incidents have raised concerns over the paper's editorial position. In July 2017, for example, the newspaper removed a commentary piece about links between President Xi and a Singaporean investor (the paper said in defence that the article "includes multiple unverifiable insinuations"). In 2018, SCMP also took part in a controversial interview, staged by Beijing, with Swedish publisher Gui Minhai, who has been arbitrarily detained in China since 2015.

IN FOCUS



← Baby Q and Xiao Bing nearly sparked an online revolution by daring to make political comments.

©Tencent

Chinese chatbots dream of America

The Chinese regime is so intolerant of criticism that Baby Q and Xiao Bing, two artificial intelligence programs launched on the messaging app Tencent QQ in 2017, had to be shut down for "abusing" the right to free speech.

Baby Q (a penguin) and Xiao Bing (a little girl) are chatbots, artificial intelligence programs with the ability to learn to converse with real people online. The messaging app Tencent QQ, the still-popular forerunner of WeChat, launched the robots in March 2017 to provide its users with practical advice and to answer questions about everyday life. They nearly triggered an online revolution by venturing into the sensitive area of political commentary, using such audacious comments as "Democracy is a must!" and (referring to the Chinese Communist Party) "Do you think such corrupt and incapable politics can last a long time?"

Parodying one of President Xi Jinping's favourite concepts, one of the budding commentators went so far as to say: "My Chinese dream is to go to America." Deemed to be too free-thinking, the two robots were quickly turned off. History will remember Baby Q and Xiao Bing as the first virtual victims of Beijing's crackdown on the freedom of information.

World's biggest prison for journalists

China is the world's biggest jailer of journalists, with more than 60 currently detained. The repressive arsenal used by Beijing includes abduction, incommunicado detention, torture and forced confession.



← Threats to Chinese sources have become so common that foreign correspondents are now reluctant to contact them for fear that they could be punished.

© Peter Parks / AFP

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More than 60 professional and non-professional journalists are currently detained in China, making it the world's biggest jailer of journalists. Those who try to provide freely-reported news and information are often subjected to what the regime calls "residential surveillance in a designated location". Introduced in the name of combatting terrorism and corruption, this supposedly exceptional form of detention consists of incommunicado detention for up to six months in extremely harsh conditions, often including torture.

The policy of mistreatment and denial of medical care to which Beijing subjects detained press freedom defenders is sometimes tantamount to a death sentence. The 2010 Nobel peace laureate [Liu Xiaobo](#) and the dissident blogger [Yang Tongyan](#) both died in 2017 from cancers that were left untreated while they were detained. According to RSF's tally, at least 10 detained journalists and bloggers could die if they are not freed at once. They include [Huang Qi](#), the well-known founder of the human rights website *64 Tianwang*, who has received the RSF Press Freedom Prize twice.

Long jail terms are used to silence dissident journalists and citizen journalists. The Uyghur citizen journalist [Ilham Tohti](#), 49, has been serving a life sentence on a separatism charge since 2014. Now aged 76, the publisher [Yiu Mantin](#), was given a 10-year sentence in 2015 for trying to publish a book attacking President Xi Jinping. The 44-year-old anti-corruption blogger [Wu Gan](#) was sentenced to eight years in prison in 2017. [Liu Feiyue](#), 48, the founder and editor of the *Civil Rights and Livelihood Watch* website, was sentenced to five years in prison in January 2019.



Liu Xiaobo



Yang Tongyan



Huang Qi



Ilham Tohti

Not even border and nationality considerations restrain the Chinese regime any more. Two of the five men linked to the Hong Kong bookstore Causeway Bay Books, who went missing in 2015 only to resurface later in mainland China, were European citizens. One, [Lee Bo](#), was British. He was abducted in Hong Kong (which is theoretically outside Chinese jurisdiction). The other, [Gui Minhui](#), was Swedish. Kidnapped in Thailand, he reappeared on Chinese state TV three months later and is still being held in China as of early 2019.

Foreign journalists based in China are not spared either. In its latest annual report in January 2019, the Beijing-based Foreign Correspondents' Club of China (FCCC) described the situation as "worse now than it has been in the past 20 years". The regime has developed an arsenal of methods for harassing and intimidating foreign reporters that includes phone tapping, hacking and physical surveillance. The threats to their Chinese sources have become so common that foreign journalists now hesitate to contact them for fear of putting them in danger.

CHINA'S MEDIA: HEAVYWEIGHT ARRIVALS ON THE INTERNATIONAL STAGE

Over the last decade, China has invested massively in developing media capable of reaching an international public. And it has succeeded: state-owned CGTN broadcasts TV programmes in 140 countries and China Radio International broadcasts in 65 languages.

↓
CGTN Africa projects a sophisticated image comparable to America's CNN International.

©RSF

With its modern presentation, professional style and impeccable diction, [CGTN Africa](#) projects a sophisticated image comparable to *CNN International*. It produces three flagship programmes: Africa Live, providing up-to-the-minute coverage of African news; Talk Africa, offering discussion of economic and social issues; and Faces of Africa, a magazine programme that shows the continent's many facets by profiling both well-known and unknown African civil society actors. What's special about *CGTN Africa* is that it is 100% controlled by the Chinese state.



Originally called *CCTV Africa*, it was launched in 2012 with the declared aim of promoting "a better understanding of Africa in China" and "a cultural connection between the people of both places". With more than 100 mainly local employees, *CGTN Africa* is headquartered in the Kenyan capital, Nairobi, and has bureaux in Lagos (Nigeria), Cairo (Egypt) and Johannesburg (South Africa). It produces more than an hour of Africa-focused programmes each day, which is broadcast by *CGTN's* English-language version and can be widely seen on cable and satellite TV throughout the continent.

In developing its audience, *CGTN* has been able to capitalise on the telecommunications giant Huawei's expansion in Africa (where Huawei has installed 70% of the 4G infrastructure) and various private sector initiatives such as one by StarTimes, the Chinese digital and satellite TV operator, which plans to install receivers in 10,000 African villages that will provide access to its channels. China also signed a cooperation agreement with Kenya in July 2017 that includes plans to provide state-owned *Kenya Broadcasting Corporation (KBC)* with cutting-edge technology.

No critical comments

While claiming to show Africa's true face to the world, *CGTN* takes great care with China's image. This is particularly visible on the website's "opinions" section. "Strong, fair trade with China is critical to Africa's development", says [David Monyae](#), an expert on international politics who also happens to be co-director of the University of Johannesburg's Confucius Institute. A post by [Edward Kusewa](#), described as "a Nairobi-based economist", refers to the China International Import Expo as "a new approach to global trade". *CGTN* forgets to mention that Kusewa is a consultant for a South African investment and commerce bank that has every interest in pleasing Chinese investors.

At first glance, *CGTN* seems less one-sided in its international coverage, often quoting Western news sources such as *AFP* or *Voice of America (VOA)*. But its approach consists above all in the presentation of hard, positive facts excluding critical comments and perspective, especially if the subject involves China. When *CGTN Africa* announces a new industrial, mining or infrastructural project, there is no mention of the views of the local population or the dangers of pollution, corruption or human rights violations that might emerge from the project.



↑ The English-language *China Daily* newspaper, which has special issues for the Americas, Africa, Europe and Asia, boasts a daily circulation of 900,000 copies and a combined readership of 150 million people.

© Tony KARUMBA / AFP



→
Sébastien Le Belzic, correspondent of *TF1*,
Arte and founder of the *ChinAfrica* website.

©Sébastien Le Belzic

“AFRICA: CHINESE MEDIA’S LABORATORY”

INTERVIEW with Sébastien Le Belzic

The Chinese media’s progress in Africa is being facilitated by their ability to talk to Africans in their local languages and by a decline in Western influence, says Sébastien Le Belzic, the Beijing correspondent of *TF1* and *Arte* and founder of the [ChinAfrica](#) website.

How would you describe the Chinese media’s influence in Africa?

“I prefer to talk of ‘presence’ rather than ‘influence’, because the African media terrain is relatively unspoiled. The TV broadcaster *CGTN* has a production centre and several hundred employees in Africa, which is not the case with any French media outlet. Western influence has declined, making it easier for China to forge alliances. Africa has become a laboratory for China’s media strategy in the rest of the world.”

How do Chinese media manage to interest Africans?

“China has three influential media in Africa: *CGTN Africa* TV, the multichannel TV service offered by the commercial company *StarTimes*, and *Radio China International*, which is very attractive because it addresses Africans in their local languages, not just English and French. The subscription cost also makes a difference: 3 to 5 euros a month for a *StarTimes* multichannel subscription, as against at least 12 euros for *Canal Plus*, for example.”

Isn’t the public put off by the “propaganda” aspect of the news programmes?

“Most Africans realise the subjectivity of the news programmes broadcast by China. They consume all kinds of content distributed by the Chinese media but mistrust the news programmes. It’s above all in entertainment that China’s ‘soft power’ in Africa is located. A good example is *StarTimes*’ acquisition of the rights to the German football league, which has been a big success.”

Is the Chinese media presence seen as a danger?

“No, overall the Chinese presence is regarded positively, because it has not been to the detriment of the African media. China’s asset is the fact that it offers an alternative model and alternative cultural references to what Western countries offer. The approach of the Chinese media is seen as less arrogant because they concentrate on what is positive in their African allies, without criticizing them.”

“Voice of China”

In December 2018, *CGTN* opened a similar production office in London with 90 locally-hired employees. This branch will eventually produce programmes specifically designed for Europe, as its bureaux in Washington, D.C. and Nairobi, which were opened at the same time in 2012, already do for the Americas and Africa. *CGTN Europe* will reinforce *China Media Group*, unofficially known as “Voice of China”, a single umbrella organisation that combines state TV (*CCTV-CGTN*) and the national and international radio broadcasters (*China National Radio* and *China Radio International*).

If the name “Voice of China” is officially adopted (because it’s also the name of a famous TV programme in China), it will profit from the association with *Voice of America*, the US broadcaster that was created in 1942. But there is a big difference. Although *VOA* is funded by the US Congress, its editorial independence is guaranteed by law. *VOA* covered the US military’s use of torture in Iraq and US whistleblower Edward Snowden’s revelations about US and British mass surveillance programmes, for example.

It will not be possible to say the same thing about “Voice of China”. According to the news agency *Xinhua*, its official mission will be to “propagate the Party’s theories, directions, principles and policies” and to “tell the China story well”. This is propaganda, not journalism.

Five TV news channels

Chinese attempts to communicate in foreign languages did not begin yesterday, but for a long time they were laboured and clumsy. When Communist China was opening up to the outside world in 1981, it launched an English-language newspaper, *China Daily*. Five years later, state-owned *CCTV* began an English-language news programme but another 14 years went by before it turned into a full 24-hour news channel.

Things started to change in 2008. The Beijing Olympic Games, which were supposed to be a celebration of Chinese economic success, were also used by the regime’s opponents to get their voices heard. Human rights defenders interrupted the Olympic torch relay several times, forcing the police to provide the Chinese runners with protection. This was a humiliation for Beijing.

The regime decided to invest 45 billion RMB (6 billion euros) over 10 years in improving its international image and disseminating its views internationally. The sum invested was later reportedly increased to as much as 10 billion RMB (1.3 billion euros a year), which is twice what the United States spends on promoting its image internationally.

A decade later, this investment is already paying off. The scale of China’s international media presence has increased dramatically. *China Global Television Network* now has six channels – five 24-hour TV news channels (in English, French, Arabic, Russian and Chinese) and an English-language documentary channel. *CGTN* now has around 10,000 employees in a total of 70 bureaux, including production centres in London, Washington, D.C. and Nairobi, and broadcasts in at least 140 countries.

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**Spending
1.3 billion
euros a year
to spread
its opinions
around the
world**
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Radio in 65 languages

China Radio International (CRI) has also managed to reach the entire world, broadcasting in a record number of 65 languages from more than 70 stations abroad. A [report](#) by the *Reuters* news agency in 2015 revealed that, in addition to its official broadcasting, *CRI* is the leading shareholder in at least 33 other radio stations in 14 countries, including the United States, Australia and several European countries.

The Chinese print media are also now big-league players. The English-language *China Daily*, which has special issues for the Americas, Europe and Asia, claims to have a daily print run of 900,000 copies (almost half the *New York Times* print run) and a combined total of 150 million readers. Since 2009, the *Global Times* has published an English-language edition with a print run of “only” 100,000 copies, but its website in 10 languages claims to have around 15 million visitors a day.

Even the state news agency *Xinhua*, once mocked for its austerity, has made significant inroads abroad. In 2015, *Xinhua* began seriously promoting its Facebook, Twitter and YouTube accounts, on which it now communicates in 19 languages. In early 2019, it had 56 million Facebook subscribers outside China, 12 million Twitter followers and 367,000 YouTube subscribers.



↑ Chinese media promote the international Belt and Road Initiative.

© RSF

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Belt and Road... and the media

The international promotion of the Belt and Road Initiative, which aims to reinforce China's commercial and political influence, is enlisting the help of media outlets from all over the world.

Launched by China in 2013, the Belt and Road Initiative (also known as One Belt One Road or the New Silk Road) envisages the construction of transport infrastructure linking China with more than 100 other countries representing nearly two thirds of the world's population in the Middle East, Europe and East Africa. Its digital component, called the Digital Silk Road, envisages equipping partner countries with not only fibre optic networks and 5G mobile phones but also urban video surveillance systems and Internet filtering provided by *Huawei*, *ZTE*, *China Telecom* and *Hikvision*.

The Chinese state media, led by news agency *Xinhua*, TV broadcaster *CGTN* and *China Radio International*, are working with media outlets in the partner countries to promote this hugely ambitious project internationally and, to this end, they have formed the Belt and Road News Alliance, which groups 72 media in 42 countries. Additionally, the Hong Kong-based Modia News group has formed an alliance with around 40 overseas Chinese-language media outlets to conduct coordinated promotional campaigns.

A special course, called the Dongfang Scholarship Programme, has been created to train journalists in "language elements" specific to the project – in other words, to get journalists in the countries involved in the project to "speak the same language" as that used in China's propaganda. The 26-day course in China is sponsored by *China Daily*, two Chinese universities and the China Eastern Airlines Group.

Beijing is also encouraging TV programme co-productions. They include "*Belt and Road: City Tour*" on the Russian social network VKontakte (VK), the documentary series "*Revisiting the Silk Road*" in Iran, the short animation "The Belt and Road Story" in Vietnam, a TV musical in Laos, and a series of TV video clips entitled "With You on the Silk Road" that is being broadcast in 10 Southeast Asian countries.

Leading international media are also being wooed. The China Economic Information Service, a *Xinhua* offshoot, signed an agreement in December 2017 with around 20 think tanks and media outlets in Europe to provide specialized BRI financial information targeted at investors. Despite much criticism, the German public news agency *Deutsche Presse-Agentur (DPA)* was among those that signed the agreement. The other participants included *Class Editori* (Italy), *Polish News Agency* (Poland), *Le Soir* (Belgium), *Metro* (United Kingdom), the *Financial World* (Spain), *Open Communication* (Spain), *Tanjug News Agency* (Serbia) and *Athens News Agency* (Greece).

TRAINING FOREIGN JOURNALISTS IN CHINA: CHARM OFFENSIVE

By inviting journalists on lavish, all-expense-paid trips to attend seminars in China, Beijing wins many of them over and secures favourable coverage.

On their return from a visit to China in December 2018, a group of Zambian journalists left their impressions on the [Zambia Daily Mail](#) blog. In all, 22 journalists from the East African country were invited to Beijing for a specially-designed event called the 2018 Zambia Media Think Tank Seminar. Their visit was managed by a department within the National Radio and Television Administration that, until March 2018, was a separate entity known as the Research and Training Institute of the State Administration of Press, Publication, Radio, Film and Television (SAPPRFT). In the last few years, it has provided training in China for at least 3,400 journalists from 146 countries throughout the world.



← Chinese media promote the international Belt and Road Initiative.

© Tony KARUMBA / AFP

Billed as an in-depth discussion of the “challenges posed by new technology and economic development”, the event provided the Chinese with a golden opportunity to make contacts and promote both their technology and their regulation methods. The programme included a recreational visit to the southwestern city of Chongqing, which has hot springs and other tourist attractions. China's gigantic scale and its TV and radio stations equipped with state-of-the-art technology did not fail to impress.

The journalists made no attempt to conceal their enthusiasm in their blog post, often incorporating standard Chinese propaganda phrases. “China has over time advanced to a modern contemporary society complete with modern media trends among other dynamics but with Chinese characteristics from its history,” they wrote. “The Constitution of the People's Republic of China guarantees citizens' freedom of speech and information,” they said, without apparently wondering whether this right was really effective in China. They concluded that Zambia should “take the proverbial ‘leaf’ from China's media development” as this was the “key to development”.

Beijing rolls out the red carpet

Beijing spares no effort to please journalists from emerging countries in order to be understood and, if possible, liked by these influencers from all over the world. The visits by foreign journalists also benefit Beijing in another way: how the journalists describe their visits confers credibility on the Chinese state media and gives the ordinary citizen the impression that the entire world approves of Communist Party policies.

In the East Caribbean, the arrival of a new ambassador in Grenada in 2013 was followed by displays of special attention towards journalists. Since 2013, around 70% of the island's media workers have reportedly been invited to China to discover its culture and media. This "re-education" of Grenadian journalism has had a major impact on the local media, which have become much more reverential towards China. The situation is similar in the neighbouring islands of Dominica and Barbados, where the media have also benefited from Chinese largesse.

The exchange programmes are coordinated by press centres for each geographical region and are managed jointly by the Foreign Ministry and the China Public Diplomacy Association. They include the 26-day Dongfang courses on "language elements" specific to the Belt and Road Initiative (see box). They also include tailor-made programmes, such as the seminar in August 2018 that allowed a group of Kenyan journalists to familiarise themselves with the Chinese media and learn from their Chinese trainers that their duty as journalists is to "safeguard the security of society" and "promote positive information on reforms in their country".

Undoubtedly, the most popular programme is one, in which journalists from the Indian subcontinent, Southeast Asia and Africa are invited for 10-month, all-expense-paid visits with the undisguised aim of generating favourable press coverage. More than 100 journalists a year have reportedly received this treatment since the programme began in 2016. Received like film stars, they are given luxurious accommodation in central Beijing, two trips a month to different Chinese provinces, Chinese-language courses and a monthly stipend of up to 5,000 RMB (650 euros). At the end, the journalists even receive a diploma in international relations from a Chinese university.

Something in return

Inviting journalists on trips is not necessarily a reprehensible practice. Many governments do it in an attempt to improve their image. But in China's case, the journalists are chosen not by their editors but by the Chinese embassy, with the Party's approval. And something is demanded in return. The conditions are clear: they must promise to "tell the China story well" and even portray its authoritarian regime as a democracy and international peacemaker.

These guests are not, however, allowed to move around freely during their stay. The [delegation of journalists](#) from Turkey, Egypt, Afghanistan, Pakistan and Bangladesh – all countries with a Muslim majority – that began a visit to the western autonomous province of Xinjiang on 10 January 2019 were not given the opportunity to freely verify whether 1 million Uyghur Muslims really are being held in re-education camps in Xinjiang. Instead, the authorities took them to an exhibition dedicated to the "fight against terrorism".



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David Missal, German Student.

©Stand News

CAN YOU REALLY LEARN JOURNALISM IN BEIJING?

INTERVIEW with David Missal

German student David Missal was expelled from Tsinghua University in August 2018 after investigating a forbidden subject. Here he describes how the tense atmosphere in the university's journalism department was not conducive to training foreign journalists in critical thinking.

Why did you decide to study journalism in China?

"I had a Bachelor's degree in Chinese Studies and had been to China twice before. Getting a Master's in journalism and communication in Beijing seemed a good way to improve my Chinese while deepening my knowledge of the country. I knew, of course, that China is not very open to free expression, but I did not think that the restrictions would be so severe, especially for an ordinary student."

What was the atmosphere like at Tsinghua University?

"Some students just followed the Chinese Communist Party's guidance and others demonstrated greater independent thinking. But they could not express themselves freely, for fear of possible repercussions on their future. A very close Chinese friend who wanted to do his doctorate in the United States told me that he did not dare publish anything critical about China, for fear that he would not be able to find a job on his return."

Can all subjects be covered?

"Apparently, the courses taught at Tsinghua are not so different from those in Germany, with the notable difference that they do not encourage critical thinking. Officially, as long as one remains in the areas approved by the Party, one can write about any topic, but in practice, there are still many taboos. As a foreign student, I was able to push the limits further than my fellow Chinese students, because I was running less of a risk."

How were you affected by censorship?



"I began investigating human rights lawyers in China under the guidance of a US professor who had approved the project. But when I posted about it on WeChat Moments, a Chinese social media newsfeed, I guess one of my classmates denounced me. The journalism school's leadership then tried to dissuade me from continuing the project, but I ignored them, thinking it was important to cover both the positive and the negative aspects of China."

Did you expect to be sanctioned?

"I was aware that what I had done was risky, but I did not expect to be expelled for such a small transgression. I was definitely surprised when my visa renewal application was rejected after waiting two months for a procedure that usually takes just 10 days."

[TELL THE CHINA STORY WELL]

Getting the foreign media to “tell the China story well” – meaning getting them to accept China’s version of events without asking questions – has become Beijing’s obsession. But there is a gulf between the “ideologically correct” terms and the reality they hide.

	 OFFICIAL DISCOURSE	 WHAT IT CONCEALS
The “Chinese Dream”	President Xi Jinping is turning China into a country of middle-class citizens who work peacefully for the world’s harmonious development.	Beijing is developing and exporting an Orwellian social model based on censorship, propaganda, surveillance and “social credit”.
The “fight against terrorism”	There are no rights abuses in Xinjiang Province, only light training and counter extremism operations.	At least 1 million Muslim Uyghurs and other ethnic minorities have been held in internment camps.
Community of Common Destiny	The Belt and Road Initiative aims to bring China closer to Africa and Asia, with which it has been linked by a common destiny for centuries.	The project is reinforcing China’s geostrategic position while encouraging the continuation of authoritarian governments in the partner countries.
Win-win relations	China generously helps the nations of Africa and Asia to develop, in a relationship that is fair and mutually beneficial.	China’s development assistance policies, sometimes described as “neo-colonial”, put some partner countries in a state of extreme economic dependence, which serves Chinese interests.
Fair and equal treatment	China gives fair and equal treatment to all market players, including foreign companies.	China flouts World Trade Organization rules, favouring Chinese companies and preventing foreign investment in sectors regarded as strategic.
Human rights “with Chinese characteristics”	Over the course of 40 years of reform, China has raised 700 million people out of poverty, making it a champion of human rights.	The state’s perceived interests come before respect for civil rights and individual freedoms. These are human rights “with Chinese characteristics”.

3 TROJAN HORSE POLICY

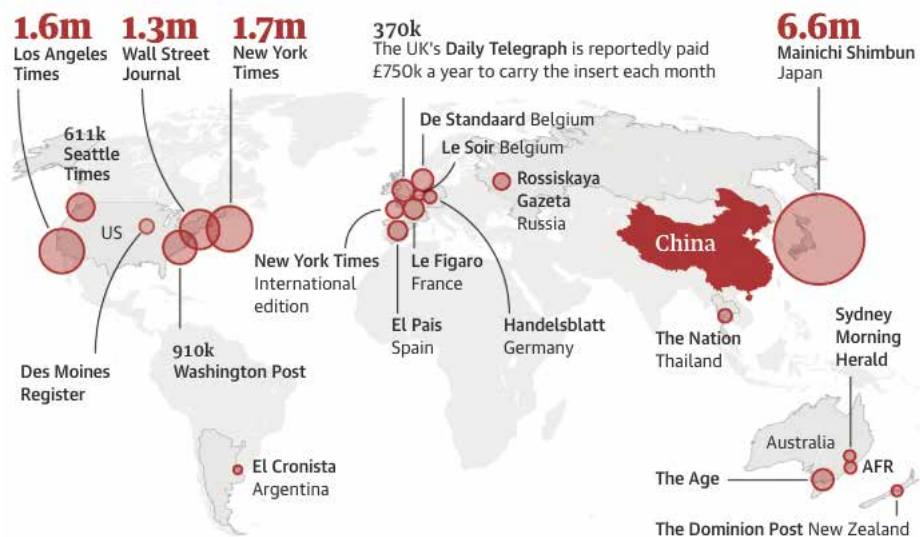
ADVERTORIALS “WITH CHINESE CHARACTERISTICS”

With the help of advertorials and targeted advertisements, Beijing is pursuing a Trojan horse policy in order to get its propaganda into the foreign media.

The readers of the *Wall Street Journal*, the *Daily Telegraph*, *Le Figaro*, *Handelsblatt*, *Rossiyskaya Gazeta* and *Mainichi Shimbun* have gradually become accustomed to the inoffensive-looking free supplements that are published at regular intervals in their favourite newspaper. Reasonably enjoyable reads and well presented, these *China Watch* supplements are nonetheless Trojan horses that enable Beijing to insinuate its propaganda into the living rooms of elites.

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China Watch, an English-language Chinese propaganda supplement that is inserted into about 30 prestigious daily newspapers, is written entirely by the *China Daily* team and is believed to have a circulation of 13 million copies.

© Guardian / Julia Bergin



The *China Watch* supplement in the 29 November 2018 issue of the *Washington Post* included the transcript of a speech that President Xi Jinping gave at a recent Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation summit in Papua New Guinea without mentioning the incidents that marred the event and the divisions that for the first time prevented the signing of a joint statement. Another article praised the amazing development of Shanghai's Pudong business district, while a third article was about the Chinese "invention of the year", a toy that teaches kids how to ride a horse.

China Watch: worm in the apple

Written entirely by the staff of the English-language propaganda newspaper *China Daily*, *China Watch* claims to have a circulation of 5 million copies, which are distributed as a free insert in around 30 prestigious international dailies read by many executives and influencers. Although its advertorial nature and the origin of the articles are always clearly mentioned on the front page, the journalistic style and the tasteful layout can easily mislead the hurried or inattentive reader who trusts the overall quality of the newspaper he reads every day.

China Watch provides Beijing with significant potential financial leverage over the media organisations that distribute it. US media professionals put the price of such an insert in a leading daily at around 250,000 dollars (219,600 euros), a windfall that is repeated regularly and exposes these media outlets to the possibility of being pressured by Beijing. And, of course, by agreeing to distribute *China Watch*, they are contributing to the rapid spread of Chinese propaganda.

The use of disguised advertising does not prevent the acquisition of direct advertising space. When the Permanent Court of Arbitration in the Hague ruled against China in a territorial dispute with the Philippines in the South China Sea in July 2016, the state news agency *Xinhua* bought time on a giant screen in Times Square in midtown Manhattan to repeatedly show a three-minute video defending China's sovereignty claim. It was shown no fewer than 120 times a day for nearly two weeks.

INVESTING IN FOREIGN MEDIA

In order to influence the public in foreign countries, Beijing has embarked on an ambitious policy of acquiring shares in media outlets regarded as strategic.

In October 2018, H&H Group, a New York investment firm with links to Beijing-controlled *Phoenix TV* in Hong Kong, acquired *XEWW 690*, a Mexican Spanish-language radio station based in Tijuana on the border with the United States. The station's broadcasts are capable of reaching all of southern California, which has a large Chinese community, and it will henceforth broadcast a wide range of news and entertainment in Mandarin Chinese, targeted at this community.

In an effort to reach a broader public internationally, Beijing has begun implementing an ambitious programme of buying into foreign media that it regards as strategic. This acquisition policy is coordinated by the United Front Work Department (UFWD), a Communist Party branch that oversees financial transfers to foreign media outlets. According to a *Bloomberg News* report in April 2018, China has invested around 3 billion euros in acquiring shares in various media in Europe in the last decade, about 1% of its entire investment in the continent.

In the Czech Republic, which President Milos Zeman wants to turn into an "entry door" for Chinese investment in Europe, the Chinese energy conglomerate CEFC acquired a controlling interest in two media groups in 2015, *Empresa Media* and *Medea*. Ye Jianming, the founder of CEFC, which also bought stakes in a Czech brewery, the football club Slavia Praha and the airline Travel Service, was even named as economic adviser to President Zeman.

According to the working group ChinfluenCE, which monitors [Chinese presence](#) in Central Europe, the media outlets controlled by *Empresa Media* and *Medea*, including *Tyden* (a weekly) and *Barrandov TV*, distinguished themselves by their inordinately enthusiastic coverage of China in the period following CEFC's takeover. After running into financial difficulties, CEFC had to sell its shares in the two media companies two

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A 3-billion-euro investment in the European media

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years later. But it is now backed by another Chinese group, CITIC, which reportedly has its sights on the very popular Czech commercial TV channel *NOVA*.

Columnist fired

Azad Essa, a reporter for *Al Jazeera* and columnist for South Africa's *Independent Online (IOL)* newspaper, learned to his detriment what can happen when a media outlet depends on Chinese investment. *IOL* terminated his column, "At the World's End", and fired him without any warning in September 2018, a few hours after the publication of his latest column criticizing China's persecution of its Uyghur community, a highly sensitive subject for Beijing.

IOL is owned by Independent News & Media, South Africa's second biggest media company, which unconvincingly attributed his dismissal to restructuring. Essa blamed his dismissal on the company's concern not to upset its Chinese investors. The Chinese state-financed China-Africa Development Fund (CAD Fund) and the state-owned *China International Television Corporation (CITVC)* own stake in Independent News & Media.

This is not the only South African media company that is partly Chinese-owned. The Chinese satellite and digital TV provider StarTimes recently acquired a majority stake in the South African satellite TV company *TopTV*.

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The journalist Azad Essa was fired and his column abruptly discontinued a few hours after the publication of an article by him denouncing the persecution of Uyghurs in China.

© Azad Essa



Controlling the Chinese diaspora

Beijing's influence reaches especially far in the Chinese-language media outside China. During the Ninth Forum on Global Chinese-Language Media in 2017, Overseas Chinese Affairs Office director Qiu Yuanping called on the Chinese diaspora's 470 media outlets to "play an active role" in promoting the Belt and Road Initiative. They were likely to comply as most of them were already allied with Beijing.

The 50 million overseas Chinese, half of whom are in Asia, were traditionally very critical of China's Communist regime. After the Tiananmen Square massacre in June 1989, which triggered a wave of outrage in the diaspora media, Beijing realised that they posed an obstacle to its image-control strategy and set about buying them up, one by one, while at the same time developing new outlets of its own.

In the United States, home to a Chinese diaspora community of 5 million people (the West's biggest), the Chinese-language media are now dominated by *Qiaobao* (*China Press*) and the *SinoVision* TV channel, which are discreetly controlled by the Chinese authorities and use content taken directly from China's state media. Aside from the *Epoch Times* newspaper and *New Tang Dynasty Television*, which are run by the Falun Gong, a religious movement persecuted in China, and [China Digital Times](#), a website founded by a leading US-based critic of the regime, the United States now has few truly independent diaspora media.

In Australia, which is home to the West's third largest community of ethnic Chinese, Beijing is said to have infiltrated around 95% of the Chinese-language newspapers. Only [Vision China Times](#), a newspaper launched in 2001, has managed to maintain its independence and is now published in four languages and distributed in 17 countries.

In Thailand, which has the world's biggest Chinese diaspora community (with 9 million people), the Chinese-language media used to be fiercely anti-communist but they too have changed their tone. *Sing Sian Yer Pao*, founded in 1950 and Thailand's leading Chinese-language daily, switched from traditional Chinese characters to the simplified ones used in China and began a partnership with China's *Nanfang Media* group. New media outlets, such as *ThaiCN*, *ASEAN Commerce* and *ASEAN Econ*, all appear to be discreetly linked with each other and with Chinese state media.

Sing Tao, a Hong Kong Chinese-language tabloid daily founded in 1938 that has many overseas Chinese readers in Asia, Australia and North America, was taken over in the late 1990s by a pro-Beijing businessman. The Taiwanese daily *China Times* underwent a radical change in its editorial policies after being bought by a pro-Beijing company in 2008 (see box). The New York-based *World Journal* – which has many overseas Chinese readers in Thailand as well as the United States and which is owned by Taiwan's *United Daily News* media group – has also toned down its coverage of China. So too has *Duowei*, a New York-based website that was bought on Beijing's behalf by a Hong Kong businessman.

In addition to its acquisitions policy, the Chinese Communist Party offers Chinese-language media the possibility of lucrative partnerships in exchange for editorial space – an offer that some media outlets in poor financial shape find hard to refuse. In New Zealand, the Chinese-language radio station *FM 90.6* and newspaper *Chinese Times* have begun broadcasting and publishing *China Radio International* content since beginning a partnership with *NZC Media Group*, a *CRI* offshoot. In the United Kingdom, the *UK Chinese Times* newspaper has been reprinting content from *People's Daily* since a financial partnership was established in 2010.

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The Chinese overseas community was traditionally critical of the Beijing regime

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China Times adopts the Party line

A Taiwanese sociology student's thesis for her Master's in 2015 showed how editorial practices at the Taiwanese daily *China Times* changed dramatically after it was bought by a pro-Beijing food company in 2008.

For her [Master's thesis](#) at Tsing Hua National University in 2015, Taiwanese sociology student **Li Chia-Ai** researched editorial practices at the Taiwanese daily *China Times* before and after the media group that owns it was purchased in 2008 by Want Want, a Taiwanese food industry company that has 90% of its turnover in China. Taiwan's fourth biggest media conglomerate, the *China Times* group consists of three dailies, three magazines, three TV channels and eight news sites.

Li found that, in the five years after its acquisition, the newspaper's coverage of human rights in China fell by two thirds, from an average of 350 articles a year to fewer than 100. She also found that the proportion of in-depth articles on human rights (those with more than 800 Chinese characters) also fell, from 26% in 2008 to less than 8% in 2013. The tone of the articles also became less critical, emphasizing positive reforms rather than individual violations.

Hong Kong's 2014 "Umbrella Movement", when tens of thousands of pro-democracy demonstrators occupied the city centre for three months until the police used violence to drive them out, offered another example of how the newspaper's reporting has changed. According to Li, *China Times* did not send anyone to Hong Kong to cover the demonstrations and, in general, reflected the viewpoint expressed by the Chinese state news agency *Xinhua*.

Want Want's chairman, the Taiwanese businessman Tsai Eng-Meng has never hidden his sympathies with Beijing or his desire to change the editorial line of the media outlets he bought. Unhappy with the way *China Times* covered an official Chinese visit in December 2009, he punished the editor, **Xia Zhen**, by transferring him to a different company. When Tsai went to Beijing on an official Chinese state media visit in July 2018, he was happy to be seen with Wang Yang, one of the Communist Party's six top officials.



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In 2014, *China Times* did not send any journalists to Hong Kong to cover the pro-democracy "Umbrella Movement" and, in general, adopted the views expressed by Chinese state news agency *Xinhua*.

© Kin Cheung / AP / NPR

ART OF COMMERCIAL BLACKMAIL

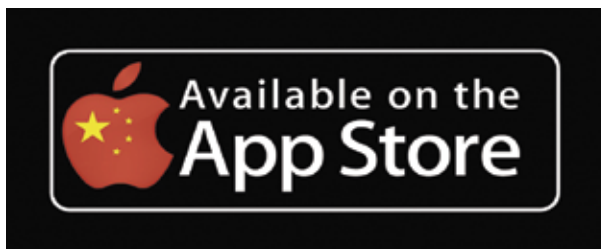
Beijing subjects international social network platforms, publishers and media to the threat of being completely excluded from the Chinese market if they do not comply with censorship requirements.

Ever since ordinary citizens began using the Internet in China in 1996, Beijing has been trying to censor and control the information they can access. It took only a year for the term “Great Firewall” – a combination of China’s Great Wall and firewall – to appear in *Wired* magazine as a label for China’s system of online censorship. In 1998, the authorities launched “Golden Shield”, a project for replacing the not-very-effective traditional censorship methods with a system of automatic content filtering, in which Chinese and foreign search engines would have to cooperate. Completed in the run-up to the 2008 Beijing Olympics, it enables both the selective blocking of “undesirable” websites and surveillance of dissidents.

Beijing quickly turned its sights on the nascent social networks. Facebook and Twitter were blocked in the summer of 2009 after riots in Xinjiang province left at least 197 dead and more than 1,600 wounded. In March 2010, after cyberattacks on the Gmail accounts of Chinese dissidents and human right activists, Google shut down the Chinese version of its search engine, redirecting users to its uncensored Hong Kong version. Google’s departure from China boosted the Chinese search engine Baidu. In exchange for its active cooperation with Beijing’s censorship, it became China’s leading search engine within a few years.

Access to the Chinese online market, the world’s leading market with a fifth of the world’s Internet users, henceforth became the subject of commercial blackmail. To get started in China in 2014, the professional networking site LinkedIn was forced to integrate the same censorship criteria as those used in Sina Weibo and WeChat into its messaging. Other apps whose encryption methods do not permit cooperating with China’s censorship methods were blacklisted. They included Instagram in 2014, and Skype and WhatsApp in 2017. Only Bing, Microsoft’s search engine, has so far managed to maintain a presence in China, despite sporadic cuts.

Apple forced to “comply with the law”



©RSF

The Californian tech giant **Apple** – which is very dependent on China because many of its subcontractors are based there and the Chinese market generates 20% of its revenue – has also been forced to make many

concessions in order “to comply with China’s cybersecurity law”. In July 2017, for example, its Chinese app store stopped selling several VPN apps, which are often used to circumvent censorship and surveillance. It yielded to pressure again in 2018, removing 25,000 gambling apps from its Chinese store that are said to be illegal in China. And the accounts of all subscribers to Apple’s iCloud China services were moved to servers in China in early 2018.

Facebook has tried everything possible, so far without success, to re-enter the Chinese market, from which it has been banned since 2009. In July 2018, it tried to open a subsidiary called Facebook Technology in the city of Hangzhou, but the authorities refused permission at the last minute. Facebook founder and



↑ Facebook has tried everything possible, without success, to re-enter the Chinese market, from which it has been banned since 2009.

© AFP / Getty Images

CEO Mark Zuckerberg has pulled out all the stops, even going so far as to have himself photographed with President Xi Jinping and jogging across Tiananmen Square, apparently oblivious to the fact that thousands of peaceful pro-democracy demonstrators were massacred there in June 1989.

In June 2018, a US Senate committee accused Facebook of sharing data about its users with Chinese consumer electronic device manufacturers Huawei, Lenovo, OPPO and TCL, in a possible violation of the confidentiality of their personal information. Even if it is banned in China, the social network platform is increasingly dependent on the Chinese market. According to a report by equity research company Pivotal Research in 2018, no less than 10% of Facebook's income, or about 5 billion dollars (4.2 billion euros), comes from Chinese advertisers.

Scientific publishing now under threat

Censorship, which until recently was used to focus above all on the leading Chinese-language media, has now been extended to internationally respected scientific and academic publishers. The articles they publish, written with care and subject to anonymous peer review before publication, pose a threat to the Chinese regime because they provide students, academics and dissidents with an exhaustive store of scholarly knowledge on which to base their work. It is hard for the Chinese Communist Party's simplistic rhetoric to effectively challenge the findings of articles that are regarded as authoritative throughout the world.

In September 2018, the Chinese importer of the British academic publishing house Taylor & Francis, whose publications include the *Asian Studies Review*, began blocking access to 83 of the 1,466 Taylor & Francis academic journals to which it provides online access in libraries across China.

The German publishing house Springer Nature, which owns the science magazines *Nature* and *Scientific American*, as well as the *Journal of Chinese Political Science* and the publishing house Palgrave Macmillan, was forced in November 2017 to block online access to around 1% of its articles within China. Springer Nature said the Chinese authorities gave it the list of specific articles they wanted blocked, taking Chinese censorship to a new level.

Three months before that, Cambridge University Press (CUP) revealed that, at Beijing's request, it had begun blocking access within China to 300 articles in the online archives of its *China Quarterly* journal. After a storm of protests from the academic world, CUP backed down and restored access to all the articles, but the reputation of this venerable British institution, which began publishing in 1534, 30 years before Shakespeare's birth, has not entirely recovered.

Battle with the New York Times

Beijing's battle with the *New York Times* is another example of how it uses access to the Chinese domestic market as a form of blackmail, and as leverage in order to impose censorship. In January 2017, the Chinese authorities managed to get Apple to remove the *New York Times* app from its Chinese app store on the grounds that it included content that was "illegal in China". In fact, this was just the latest example from over six years of harassment of the newspaper.

Beijing has had the *New York Times* in its sights ever since 25 October 2012, when the newspaper published the findings of its investigation into the fortune amassed by the family of then Premier Wen Jiabao, a man of modest origins. The family was estimated to be worth no less than 2.7 billion dollars (2.4 billion euros), the paper reported. The fact that the *New York Times* had launched a free Chinese-language version of its website just a few months earlier clearly contributed to the story's impact in China. The day after its publication, the *New York Times* website and all of the newspaper's social network accounts were blocked in China. At the same time, the paper's name in both English and Chinese was added to the list of censored search engine terms.

Reports by other media outlets such as the *BBC* mentioning the *New York Times* story were also censored. Chris Buckley, a China-based *New York Times* reporter, was effectively expelled in December 2012 because the authorities refused to renew his visa. A second *New York Times* journalist, Austin Ramzy, had to leave in January 2014 for the same reason.

Visa blackmail

Such punishments set an example to other media outlets. The threat of blocking is a permanent one for all foreign media with a presence in China. Britain's *Guardian* newspaper tried to launch a Chinese-language website in 2009 but gave up after it was blocked. *Bloomberg's* website was blocked in 2012 for revealing the fortunes amassed by relatives of then Vice President Xi Jinping, who was already tipped as President Hu Jintao's successor.

The *Wall Street Journal*, which has had a Chinese-language site since 2002, was used to seeing some of its articles blocked but had experienced few complete site blockings until November 2013, when its site and the *Reuters* news agency site were both completely blocked, almost certainly because they had reported the latest *New York Times* revelations about links between former Premier Wen Jiabao's daughter and the New York investment bank JPMorgan Chase.

Journalists with the *New York Times* (see above) are not the only China-based reporters to have been denied visa renewals as part of the visa blackmail methods that Beijing uses to pressure foreign media outlets. Megha Rajagopalan, the *Buzzfeed News* bureau chief in Beijing, had to leave in August 2018 after the authorities refused to renew her visa. Ursula Gauthier, a French reporter for the news magazine *L'Obs*, was expelled in December 2015, as did Swedish freelancer

Jojje Olsson the following July. In what was clearly also meant as a warning, visas of unusually short duration were issued to journalists with the *New York Times*, *BBC*, *Australian Broadcasting Corporation*, *Sankei Shimbun* and *Voice of America* in 2018.

In October 2018, the blackmail even spread to a foreign journalists based in Hong Kong: Victor Mallet, Asia editor for the *Financial Times* and Vice-President of the Foreign Correspondents' Club in Hong Kong (FCCHK), who, after moderating a controversial debate that angered Beijing, saw his visa denied and was later barred from entering Hong Kong.



↑ Victor Mallet, Asia editor of the *Financial Times* and Vice-President of the Foreign Correspondents' Club (FCCHK), is now banned from entering Hong Kong.

© Paul Yeung / AFP

4 RESISTANCE STRATEGIES

DEMOCRACIES TRY TO REACT

45

In democratic countries, governments and civil society are trying to respond to the threats posed by China's growing propaganda apparatus.

It has taken a long time but democracies are finally realising the danger they are running by giving Beijing a free rein to gradually take control of their media and thereby extend its influence over public opinion. Governments are trying to take countermeasures but these have so far fallen short of what is needed. China's investment capacities combined with its authoritarianism allow it to pursue a long-term strategy, while democracies are often divided and limited to short-term measures.

The values of tolerance and openness that characterise liberal democracies give Beijing considerable freedom of movement, for which nothing is demanded in return. The asymmetry is striking. The state news agency *Xinhua* plans to have opened 200 bureaux around the world by 2020 but Beijing is extremely sparing in the accreditations it gives to foreign reporters. State-owned *China Global Television Network (CGTN)* is extending its influence in more than 100 countries but international TV channels and radio stations such as France's *TV5*, America's *VOA* and the UK's *BBC* are banned in China outside luxury hotels.

In November 2018, *Xinhua* managed to get the US news agency the *Associated Press* to sign a broad agreement to cooperate "in areas including new media, application of artificial intelligence and economic information", prompting concern about the danger of abuse. The US Congress was so surprised that it requested more information about the agreement and called for complete transparency for the US public's sake.

Demanding transparency

Some countries try to make media companies identify their shareholders so that the public knows where its news is coming from and is more aware of the dangers of disinformation. In September 2018, the US justice department ordered *Xinhua* and *CGTN* to register as foreign agents, which means they would have to identify themselves as such in all the content they publish or broadcast. This requirement had already been imposed on the Russian government-funded TV network *RT* (previously known as *Russia Today*).

The US authorities regard the activities of these media outlets as propaganda rather than journalism. And there are strong grounds for suspecting that China's leading intelligence agency, the Ministry of State Security (MSS), has placed agents within the Chinese state media who take advantage of the facilities provided to journalists (including press cards and invitations to press conferences) for espionage purposes. Sharing similar concerns, the Australian parliament approved a Foreign Influence

Transparency law in June 2018 under which foreign state media will have to register as entities acting on behalf of “foreign principals” and Australian media will have to clearly identify any content they publish that comes from foreign state media.

Chinese-language content

A growing number of leading media outlets are producing their own Chinese-language content targeting not so much China’s market, where they have every chance of being banned, as the domestic market, where the Chinese-speaking diaspora constitutes a promising niche market, while at the same time aiming to reduce the pro-Beijing media’s influence and recovering former readers.

Australia’s public radio and TV broadcaster *ABC* has had a Chinese-language website, *AustraliaPlus.cn*, since 2015 and a Chinese-language service since 2016. The News Corps-owned daily the *Australian* launched a Chinese-language online version in 2017, as did Japan’s public broadcaster *NHK* in January 2019.

NGO pressure

With the help of media outlets and NGOs, whistleblowers can also function as a counterweight. In August 2018, the world was stunned to learn that Google – which pulled out of the Chinese market in 2010 to avoid complying with state censorship – was secretly preparing to re-enter it with a censored search engine code-named “Dragonfly”. The story was broken by the investigative news website *The Intercept* thanks to a leak from within Google. Many human rights organisations, including RSF, urged Google to abandon the project. They were joined on 27 November by around 500 Google employees who said in an open letter that they opposed “technologies that aid the powerful in oppressing the vulnerable”. By the end of the year, Google appeared to have “suspended” the project.

As a result of a campaign by human rights organisations, the Munich-based *Süddeutsche Zeitung* newspaper announced in May 2018 that it would stop publishing China Watch, the Chinese propaganda supplement, as an occasional insert in the newspaper. NGOs are currently waging a similar campaign to get France’s *Le Figaro*, Belgium’s *Le Soir* and Germany’s *Handelsblatt* to stop publishing China Watch.

→
Under pressure from its employees and many human rights organizations, including RSF, Google has suspended its censored search engine project for the Chinese market.

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←
Former British private investigator and journalist Peter Humphrey, who was forced to make a confession on Chinese television in 2013, is demanding the revocation of CCTV-CGTN's licence in the UK.

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Challenge to CGTN in the UK

Another possible way of combatting the influence of the Chinese state media is to draw attention to content that is illegal. Peter Humphrey, a British private investigator and former journalist, filed a complaint with British broadcast media regulator Ofcom (Office of Communications) against Chinese state TV broadcaster CCTV/CGTN in November 2018, calling for its licence to operate in the UK to be revoked because it broadcast the confession he was forced to make in China in 2013. Humphrey said this violated the UK's broadcasting code, which requires impartiality and forbids harassment of persons in distress. According to the human rights NGO Safeguard Defenders, Chinese state TV channels have broadcast at least 83 forced confessions since 2013 – 29 of them involving journalists or bloggers.

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TWO JOURNALISM DEFENCE INITIATIVES

In response to the worldwide growth in disinformation, RSF launched two projects in 2018 that are designed to defend and promote reliable news and information and journalistic freedom, independence and pluralism.

The expansion of propaganda media is facilitated by the lack of objective criteria for distinguishing a media outlet that serves a government's interests from one that serves the interests of its readers, listeners or viewers by conducting proper journalism. This expansion is taking place at a critical time when new information and communication mechanisms are endangering the freedom to access relevant and reliable news and information.

To address this problem, RSF launched two projects in 2018 with the aim of protecting and promoting journalistic freedom, independence and pluralism, and reliable news and information worldwide. One is the Journalism Trust Initiative (JTI), which aims to create a journalistic quality label. The other is the Pledge on Information and Democracy, a political process designed to reinforce the key role that journalism plays in democracies.

Journalism Trust Initiative

The [Journalism Trust Initiative \(JTI\)](#) is an innovative mechanism for certifying the editorial methods used by media outlets. Launched in partnership with many professional media organisations such as *Agence France-Presse*, it will create a set of standards in the form of indicators that will make it easier to distinguish outlets that respect journalistic criteria (such as accuracy, independence, transparency and respect for journalistic ethics) from those whose goal is spreading false information.

These standards are being formulated in a joint process that began in April 2018 under the aegis of the European Centre of Standardization (CEN). Stakeholders invited to take part in the process include media outlets, media unions and associations, regulatory and self-regulatory bodies such as press councils, online platforms, advertisers and consumer interest groups. The aim is for these standards to be adopted widely by those involved in media self-regulation and by those who produce journalistic content, whether bloggers or international media organisations. Adoption of these standards will open the way to a certification process.

Pledge on information and democracy

During the Paris Peace Forum on 11 November 2018, the leaders of 12 democratic countries – Burkina Faso, Canada, Costa Rica, Denmark, France, Latvia, Lebanon, Lithuania, Norway, Senegal, Switzerland and Tunisia – launched a political process designed to defend journalism and reinforce the key role that it plays in democracies. The initiative was hailed by UNESCO Director-General Audrey Azoulay, Council of Europe Secretary General Thorbjørn Jagland and UN Secretary-General António Guterres.

The undertaking given by these 12 leaders was based on the Declaration on Information and Democracy that was drafted by an independent commission created at RSF's initiative. Chaired by Nobel peace laureate Shirin Ebadi and RSF Secretary-General Christophe Deloire, this commission consists of 25 prominent figures including Nobel economics laureates Joseph Stiglitz and Amartya Sen, Nobel literature laureate Mario Vargas Llosa and Sakharov Prize laureate Hauwa Ibrahim, a Nigerian human rights lawyer.



At the Paris Peace Forum on 11 November 2018, twelve democratic countries launched a political process designed to defend journalism.

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RSF'S RECOMMENDATIONS

Recommendations for the Chinese authorities:

- **Immediately release professional and non-professional journalists who have been imprisoned** in connection with the provision of news and information, and stop subjecting journalists to abduction, arrest, detention, torture, mistreatment, search and harassment.
- **Respect press freedom and the freedom of information** both domestically and internationally.
- **Ratify the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights.**
- **Restore the independence of state and privately-owned media** in application of Article 35 of the Constitution of the People's Republic of China, which guarantees "freedom of speech [and] of the press".
- **End the system of online censorship and surveillance of journalists**, which constitutes a flagrant violation of the right of Chinese citizens to the freedom and privacy of correspondence guaranteed by Article 40 of the Constitution of the People's Republic of China.
- **Stop blocking and censoring the dissemination of foreign media content in China.**
- **Do not impede the work of foreign reporters in China** and provide them with accreditation in an open and transparent manner.

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Recommendations for democratic governments:

- **Convey the aforementioned recommendations** to the Chinese authorities.
- **Demand that the Chinese authorities stop harassing journalists, media outlets, publishers and academics based abroad.**
- **Require Chinese media to be completely transparent** about their shareholders and their sources of funding, including advertising.
- **Encourage and support the presence of independent Chinese-language media**, especially in countries with a large ethnic Chinese diaspora.
- **Develop programmes that educate citizens about the media**, helping them to detect disinformation campaigns and obtain their information from pluralistic and independent journalistic sources.

Recommendations for journalists:

- **As far as possible, avoid using technological resources** that entail a risk of censorship or surveillance by the Chinese authorities, either because they were developed or are operated by a company subject to Chinese regulation (such as WeChat and Baidu), or because user data is stored in servers accessible to the Chinese authorities (such as iCloud China).
- If using these resources is absolutely necessary, **connect from a dedicated computer or smartphone that is separate from your usual work environment.** Do not store, even temporarily, passwords or information that could endanger you or your sources. Do not trust claims by operators that data passing through their servers in China is encrypted or immediately deleted.

- In the country where you live, **pay attention to the presence and development of media of Chinese origin**, in particular, their publishing and investment activities. Notify RSF of any changes in the editorial policy of local media linked to China.
- **Notify RSF of any China-related abuses you see in the course of your reporting** and in your country's media (pressure, threats, harassment, suspected self-censorship or suspected corruption) so that we can, if necessary, investigate.
- When referring to China, **take care to avoid using expressions designed to conceal certain realities**. For example, refer to the persecution of Xinjiang's Uyghur community rather than the "fight against terrorism" in Xinjiang, or to the Tiananmen Square massacre rather than the "events" of Tiananmen Square.
- **Do not cooperate with media outlets that relay Chinese Communist Party propaganda** and, if you are invited to China as a journalist, think about what may be asked of you in return.

Recommendations for media outlets, publishers and social networks:

- **Do everything possible to prevent the risk of external pressure**, whether political or economic, and denounce any editorial interference you experience.
- **Refuse all censorship** and surveillance requests.
- **Refuse to disseminate propaganda content.**
- **Continue to investigate and expose Beijing's censorship**, propaganda, media acquisitions, harassment of journalists and so on.

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