

Journalists and the media in China are often viewed as mere mouthpieces of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP). Historically, this belief has been well-founded: journalists in China have faced the threat of censorship, legal action, and arrest. These threats have been well-documented by the Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ) and other press freedom groups. Forty-two journalists are now in prison in China, most for revealing corruption among high-level government officials, advocating political reforms, or reporting on other banned topics (CPJ, 2008). Yet the role of the media in China is rapidly changing and increasingly complex.

During the last 20 years, fuelled by the economic pressures which bind together the boardroom and the newsroom, China's media have undergone supreme changes. The result is more insistent and prolific reporting, on a wider variety of topics than ever before. The media in China is beginning to fulfil journalism's goal to spark debate in the public sphere, to advocate, to inform and to instigate change.

It is almost impossible to understand the present style of journalism in China without first delving into the past (de Burgh, 2003).

Historically, journalism in China functioned under an authoritarian model of the press, which requires "direct government control of the mass media" (Siebert et al, 1956), and operates under the assumption that the government is infallible. Most journalists simply saw themselves as the "tongue and throat of the CCP" (de Burgh, 2003). The mass media was highly regulated, heavily reliant on state funding, and banned from publishing material which went against Party ideology. Politics and propaganda took precedence over truthful news reporting, with dissident ideas quickly silenced. As Knight (2006) notes, "generations of Chinese journalists have been forced to accommodate, rationalise and advocate a series of truth-sensitive regimes of various shades of repression". Topics deemed appropriate for discussion were "limited to those which glorified Chinese historical events, especially recent history which taught how essential the arrival of the CCP and how glorious its victory" (de Burgh, 2003).

China underwent economic reforms in the late 1970s. The reforms, known as the 'Southern Progress', were initiated by former leader Deng Xiaoping. De Burgh (2003) explains that

“following the Southern Progress, a process known as ‘media commercialisation’ got underway, in response to various pressures upon the media: the demand for advertising opportunities, the inability of the state to continue to subsidise the media, the public demand for more media and the advent of new technology requiring extensive investment”. The Southern Progress thus helped launch media reforms by “decreasing government subsidies to the media, who consequently became more reliant on advertising and circulation fees to stay afloat” (Beach, 2004).

Following the Southern Progress, many mainland media outlets became economically independent of the government. According to de Burgh (2003), China has opened up economically to outside businesses and ideas. “The media have adjusted and now contrast very markedly with the media of the first decades of CCP dictatorship” (de Burgh, 2003).

Beach (2004) notes that “as the commercialization of the Chinese media progressed, and editors learned that newspapers can be valuable money-making enterprises, journalists were encouraged to report more aggressively on stories that comprise the bulk of tabloid journalism around the world: crime, low-level corruption, police brutality, celebrity gossip, and natural and man-made disasters”. Local officials often tolerate this reporting, “as long as it brings in revenue for the provincial government, and it doesn't touch too closely on their own leadership” (Beach, 2004). Several major official newspapers have launched tabloid-style dailies or weekend editions, often with private investment or advertising revenue, which become their primary income generator (Beach, 2004).

Their newfound economic freedoms provided the Chinese mainland media with some degree of independence (de Burgh, 2003). Yet despite the reforms, the Chinese mainland media remained vastly different to that of Hong Kong. Hong Kong illustrates the concept of ‘one country, two systems’ that plays out in the Chinese media. Hong Kong has a separate legal system from most of China, as part of the agreement that returned the city to Chinese rule in 1997. Freedom of the press and publication are enshrined in Article 27 of the Basic Law, Hong Kong's constitution. Hong Kong's press operate under Siebert et al's (1956) libertarian model, with minimal government intervention and relatively free speech. Knight (2006) explains that Hong Kong “remains a sanctuary for the dissident ideas needed to give journalism its intellectual spark and ethical impulse”. The media in Hong Kong regularly carry photos and reports that would be banned on the Chinese mainland.

Although Chinese media are increasingly economically independent, Knight (2006) notes that “a free market is not necessarily interdependent with free speech”. The mainland Chinese press are still subject to censorship from the government. It is difficult to distinguish a clear policy of censorship, aside from the recent attempts to install Green Dam filters designed to censor the internet, onto personal computers (Branigan, 2009).

Today, mainland China appears to operate under a Soviet media system similar to that of Singapore: journalists may report on whatever they wish, provided they do not directly criticise the government.. Siebert et al (1956) explains that the soviet theory “is closely tied to a specific ideology: the communist”. In the Soviet system, the mass media are not allowed to print or broadcast anything which could undermine the established authority or show dissent for existing political values.

The censorship and control of issues is “overt in times of crisis when the party will instruct the media to deploy the New China News Agency texts” (de Burgh, 2003). The government steps in whenever a sensitive, or potentially controversial, story arrives.

Additionally, a large amount of censorship of Chinese journalism is self-imposed. Siebert et al’s (1956) soviet theory explains that the media are “expected to be self-regulatory with regard to content”, and many journalists in China are just that. Chinese journalists remain bound by traditional cultural and political values. Their myths “reflect the evolution of mainland Chinese journalism: the role of the CCP as national saviour, the benefits of paternalistic leadership, the myth of harmony and most recently the belief in salvation through wealth” (Knight, 2006). They are thus unwilling to publish material which shows China in a negative light (Beach, 2004).

A comparison of mainland China’s reporting of sensitive issues to that of Hong Kong and Singapore reveals examples of censorship. Due to language barriers, the scope of this comparison has been limited to English-language publications.

Perhaps the most sensitive news issue of recent times was the July 2009 Urumqi riots, between the Uyghurs and the Hans. What began as a protest escalated into riots, leaving many dead. When the

riots ended, Xinhua reported 197 dead and 1,721 injured (Yinan, 2009). The World Uyghur Congress claimed that the death toll was much higher, at around 600 (Hogg, 2009).

The Chinese government raced to stop netizens (Hauben, 1996) posting video, images and words about the unrest on the Internet. Facebook, Flickr, Twitter and YouTube were blocked in China late in the first day of the riots, while leading Chinese search engines would not give results for 'Urumqi' or 'riot' (Hogg, 2009). Traditional press, including Xinhua and China Daily, carried only the official version of events, which blamed the unrest on ethnic Muslim Uyghurs.

But similar to the phenomenon seen during Iran's political turmoil, pictures, videos and updates from Urumqi were posted to social networking websites by Internet-savvy users who could get around censorship attempts (Hogg, 2009).

Despite the attempted censorship of the Urumqi riots, China is progressing toward greater openness, though the steps are small. Past attempts to control issues by "simply ignoring the fact that they occurred" (Beach, 2004), were not repeated in the case of the Urumqi riots. Despite the attempted Internet blackout and censorship of domestic press, Hogg (2009) notes that the Chinese government was uncharacteristically open to foreign journalists. The mobility of foreign press was not limited, showing that "China learnt lessons from its suppression of the violence in Tibet and the perception it created that it had something to hide by trying to restrict the information that came out" (Hogg, 2009). Similarly, Earp (2009) reported that international journalists covering the riots were allowed a "privileged enclave of Internet access, and an official tour of the city's ravaged centre".

Similar openness to foreign press was denied just months earlier during the 20th anniversary of the 1989 Tiananmen Square crackdown. The anniversary saw mass demonstrations and rallies throughout China and Hong Kong.

Foreign and domestic journalists were denied access to Tiananmen Square prior to and during the sensitive anniversary (Boden, 2009), as authorities moved aggressively to make sure the anniversary was not marked publicly anywhere on the mainland. As with the Urumqi riots, a massive crackdown was launched on weblogs, websites and social networking systems (Wines and Jacobs, 2009). Domestic print and broadcast news outlets failed to mention the significant day.

In contrast, and further illustrating the notion of ‘one country, two systems’, Hong Kong’s libertarian press covered the anniversary in great depth. The South China Morning Post ran over twenty stories in two weeks, labelling the event a “bloody crackdown” and a “massacre” (Yeung, 2009). It spoke of Beijing police “smothering commemoration activities” and even backed a UN call for political prisoners to be freed.

There were also many issues surrounding coverage of the 2008 Olympic Games, held in Beijing. China Daily pumped out glowing patriotic reports of China’s Olympic efforts. It published countless stories about the torch relay, and several full-page photo essays with headlines like ‘Keep Olympic Joy Flowing’ (Lau, 2009). However, China Daily did not mention any negative aspects of the games.

In contrast, Hong Kong’s libertarian media covered all of the issues surrounding the games. The South China Morning Post covered the triumphs of the games. Articles titled ‘Dream Finale’ and ‘Games have gone well’ showed pride in China’s hosting efforts (Lau, 2009). The South China Morning Post gave balanced coverage, and also reported on the criticism surrounding the games, including the unrest in Tibet and protests for free speech.

Similarly, other Hong Kong publications gave voice to the criticism surrounding the games, through stories and images. HK Magazine published the editorial ‘Torching the Torch’, calling the Olympic relay “the perfect microcosm of modern China: a PR exercise surrounded by thugs with batons” (HK Magazine, 2009). The April cover of the Hong Kong-based Far Eastern Economic Review had a political cartoon of China’s President holding the torch, with earplugs blocking out noise from protesters. The Standard had the words “Baptism of Fire” across its front page, accompanied by an illustration of an Olympic torch with “Chinese military on one side and free speech activists on the other” (Lau, 2009).

Singapore’s The Straits Times also offered more balanced coverage than the mainland (Lau, 2009). The paper ran articles about the protests and economic concerns, but was less eager than Hong Kong’s press to directly criticise the government.

Yet although the mainland Chinese press censors these sensitive issues, de Burgh (2003) notes, by the standards of the first forty years of the rule of the CCP, the wide “range of subjects today aired in the Chinese media is quite startling”. It is important to note that issues which were highly sensitive a decade ago are reported more openly than ever before.

The tenth anniversary of Hong Kong's return to the People's Republic of China received blanket coverage by the mainland media in 2007. Reports focused on how Hong Kong “had become ‘even more wonderful’ over the last ten years...yet when tens of thousands of Chinese citizens took to the streets for a pro-democracy demonstration, it was not reported by the mainland media” (Datong, 2007).

Yet just two years later, a front-page Global Times report on the 12th anniversary of the handover, detailed the pro-democracy demonstrations. The story stated that “the crowd, estimated by organizers at 76,000, demonstrated in the afternoon, voicing their concerns on a number of issues...and expressing frustration at their government on a gamut of issues” (Wei, 2009). This simply would have been omitted from mainland news coverage in prior years.

Additionally, the taboo topic of homosexuality is beginning to be covered by the mainland media. The China Daily recently ran a series of news features on homosexuality, which was officially recognised as a mental illness until 2001. The reports praised Shanghai’s inaugural Gay Pride Festival, and called for the government to recognise same-sex marriage (Yanfeng, 2009). Such open-minded views may not have been expressed in mainland media in previous years.

Though Chinese journalism seems markedly different to Western journalism, one emerging trend unites the two. As in the West, the boardroom and the newsroom are inexplicably bound. As Franklin (cited in de Burgh, 2003) notes, “human interest has supplanted the public interest; the trivial has triumphed over...the reporting of significant issues and events of international consequence. Traditional news values have been undermined by new values; infotainment is rampant”. This similarity is highlighted by the coverage of Michael Jackson’s death, which dominated news headlines in both China and the West for weeks.

Journalism in China is rapidly changing. Chin-Chuan (1990) argues that the Chinese media have

“made much more progress than the Western news media”, considering their relative beginnings. Recent openness to foreign press in the midst of a crisis is unprecedented. Topics which were once ignored now receive news coverage. Chinese media have moved away from Siebert et al’s (1956) authoritarian model of the press. While political reporting today is still tightly controlled, “Chinese journalists have transformed themselves from state propaganda workers and government mouthpieces into professional reporters who cover aspects of society, economics, and international affairs that would have been prohibited two decades ago” (Beach, 2004).

The change seems to be the “result of the major economic revolution taking place in the country, and it may be necessary for the continuation of these economic developments” (Becker, 2001). If this is the case, we can expect Chinese journalism to continue to evolve as the country enters the world trading market in the coming years. The only certainty is that the future of journalism in China is complicated and nuanced. If it seems China has a long way to go, one must first think about how far they have come.