

# China Project

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By Paul Sutherland

China has entered a new age that calls for a reconsideration of the relationship between media, communication, society, and culture, and indeed its relationship with the international community. It is a country undergoing immense change across all areas, and its media is at the forefront of this change. “In China, media changes have been a political and economic project directed by the Communist Party-state... (Lee, 2004: 12). While this is certainly true, there are other factors at play. This paper will outline how the media industry in China, as in other countries, is undergoing extensive change. There are several factors contributing to this changing media dynamic, but the increasing importance and use of the Internet, changing social attitudes among the Chinese public and the actions of the government are some of the most substantial elements.

China’s media is essentially what Siebert (1956) called ‘New Authoritarian’ – that is, Authoritarian with Soviet-Communist influences. Its purpose is to support and advance the policies of the government, and to service the Chinese state in general. However, there is a changing dynamic in China’s media as it develops as a globalised nation with increasing international media interests.

Callick (2009) has described China’s desire to have the ‘soft power’ of global media influence. He suggests China’s aim is to, “become world leader...in the ‘soft power’ game of international media influence” (42). China Central Television, the government owned national TV station of China, serves as an example of China’s increasing desire to become more involved in the international community, and more specifically, a bigger player in global media operations. At the end of 2008, China’s propaganda chief Li Changchun told the country’s media to increase construction of international news channels and ensure that China’s media was widely received around the world. The resources of CCTV, the state news agency *Xinhua*, and newspaper *People’s Daily* were significantly boosted to meet this demand (Callick, 2009: 42). CCTV Currently operates 20 free-to-air channels and 20 pay TV channels, employing around 15,000 people. In 2008, CCTV’s programs reached 137 countries and regions and the world,

and had business and production relationships with 213 media outlets; and its global influence is growing. CCTV has foreign bureaus around the world, and Chen Zhansheng, the Section Chief of International Relations at CCTV, said there are plans to establish more international bureaus. “Currently we have 19 bureaus worldwide, but we are going to set up more offices...in Africa, in Latin America...in Spain...” (Chen, 2009). These actions are a clear indication of China’s desire to be more influential in the global media sphere. While many media outlets around the world are being forced to scale back their operations because of economic concerns, CCTV continues to expand – a major benefit of being a state-run media outlet. However, Chen (2009) insists government funding for CCTV is minimal.

“We are funded by advertisement...The government just funds it a little bit, I think less than 1 percent...But CCTV is also the State TV station. We have to publicise the government’s policies. But we have our editorial independence”.

As an employee of CCTV, Chen’s assurances are clearly biased, and it may well be the broadcasting of these government policies that has led to what the Australian Broadcasting Corporation’s China correspondent Steven McDonnell (2009) calls “scepticism about what’s in the press” amongst the Chinese, which might, in turn, have played a role in the staggering increase in Internet use as a means of obtaining unbiased information.

“In the matter of the Internet...the government has been and intends to be decidedly proactive. Chinese enthusiasm for the Internet, as for mobile phones, has been sensational...” (de Burgh, 2003:26). Chen (2009) has claimed the internet has become a more popular means of accessing news, particularly among younger generations. “I think the Internet is playing a more important role as a news broadcasting channel. Even the government’s leaders...have a dialogue with the net.” In fact, the number of Internet users in China jumped nearly 42% to 298 million by the end of 2008 from the previous year, according to data from the China Internet Network Information Centre (Wei, 2009). But the increasing availability and use of the Internet is proving to be problematic for the government. Although China is purportedly keen to expose itself to the outside world, this also means its citizens are exposed to western ideas, values and beliefs that the government does not necessarily agree with. Of course, there is also the issue of taboo topics – certain issues the government refuses to acknowledge, and which those in the domestic Chinese media industry tend to steer clear of. “People in China talk about three Ts and an F – Tiananmen, Taiwan, Tibet and Falun Gong. And they’re just the things you don’t talk about”

(McDonnell, 2009). It is becoming increasingly difficult to censor the Internet and avoid articles relating to such taboo topics.

Different areas of China are all vastly different in terms of press freedom, media ownership and the methods by which the news is distributed and accessed. Reporters Without Borders recently released their Freedom of the Press 2009 report. In terms of how freely the press operates, China ranked 181<sup>st</sup> out of 195 countries, Singapore ranked 151<sup>st</sup> and Hong Kong 75<sup>th</sup>. The media in both China and Singapore were given the status 'Not Free', whereas Hong Kong was rated 'Partly Free'. In contrast, Australia ranked 38<sup>th</sup> and was labelled 'Free'. Hong Kong, considered a Special Administrative Region of China, is largely self-governing. As a major financial centre, Hong Kong is home to many foreign media organizations, and its media is essentially libertarian in nature. Here, these media organisations have more freedom to report on events in China than those on the mainland would not ordinarily have the opportunity to do, although, one academic, Jay Rosen (2005), is pessimistic about the media in places such as Hong Kong. He says China does not have a free press, except in zones where something resembling it is allowed by the authorities to go on. The majority of Hong Kong media are run on a commercial basis, with only a few newspapers and special-interest media being supported by the Chinese Communist Party. Judging from the popularity of the three most sensational newspapers in Hong Kong – the *Oriental Daily News*, *The Sun* and *Apple Daily* – the majority of people in Hong Kong are not consumers of serious news. They consume media for entertainment and 'soft' information. "The majority of the audience simply does not care about the political stances of the media" (Lee, 2005: 85).

Alternatively, the contemporary mainstream media stream in Singapore is largely duopolized by two government-controlled media heavyweights, Singapore Press Holdings and the Media Corporation of Singapore, and closely managed by the government (George 2002: 173). Lee (2005) has claimed:

"...media and journalism in Singapore can be said to play a government-sanctioned 'civic' role, which is to inform and educate the public on government policies, and thus contribute to nation-building" (15).

However, he goes on to suggest the increasing use of the Internet is affecting Singapore's media dynamic. "...alternative and new online organs continue to pose a threat to the hegemony of mainstream news in Singapore" (16).

One example is the website *Sammyboy.com*, which claims to publish news that Singapore's the *Straits Times* does not, and attempts to undermine government censorship by blending political commentary with links to pornography (Lee, 2005: 23). Such alternative news websites are the main portal for journalists to participate in a more democratic media space, free from government control and intervention, and also reinforce the increasing relevance of the Internet as a news broadcasting platform.

Some publications in China, Singapore and Hong Kong are certainly bolder in their reporting than others. 2009 in particular has been an important year for China in terms of its history, with many important anniversaries occurring. But in searching some of these publications' websites for 'Tiananmen Square', for example – twenty years after the infamous massacre – delivers mixed results. Only one article, on the *Straits Times* website, returns a result relating to the 1989 massacre. The article, titled '*Release Chinese dissident*', relates to a pro-democracy protestor, detained for 20 months for participating in the 1989 riots, who has again been jailed for authoring a manifesto urging civil rights and reforms. All other articles from the other publications refer to the Square in another context. In refining the search to 'Tiananmen Square Protests', one article relating to the 1989 event can be found on Hong Kong's politically independent *South China Morning Post* website, but still no articles relating to the protests are found on the *China Daily* website. The topic is taboo, and it is clear China is still refusing to openly acknowledge these events, while the press in Singapore and Hong Kong have minimal references to the protests. However, the lack of information on these events might not be the result of a direct government order, rather the outcome of self-censorship.

Contrary to the beliefs of many, there are no government officials watching over each media agency, breathing down the necks of journalists to ensure they are following party guidelines. Instead, journalists often self-censor their work, giving the impression government intervention in media practices is minimal. Tan Hongkai, the opinions editor at *China Daily*, disputes the idea the paper acts on behalf of the government.

"We make relatively independent decision as an organization; our opinions are entirely ours – not directly tied up with official background, as we're often viewed, nor issued on someone else's instructions. We do not represent ourselves as a mouthpiece..." (Hongkai, 2008: 55).

The truth is the employees of these media outlets are well aware of what can be reported, and what could land them in jail. Any articles that cast a negative light on the government would not likely be approved by the editor, and would probably never be written in the first place. While Hongkai (2008) has claimed, “Chinese society and Chinese media are no longer homogenous” (57), it seems some publications are keen to mimic changing social attitudes, becoming bolder in their treatment of certain topics. Homosexuality, for example, was a previously taboo topic, but has been widely explored and discussed in the Chinese media lately. *China Daily’s* online component published a series of stories relating to homosexuality in China, how perceptions to it are changing, and how societal beliefs will continue to evolve. In contrast most articles referring to homosexuality on the *Xinhua* website are reports about the prevalence of HIV/AIDS amongst homosexuals in China – a negative approach to reporting on the issue. It is interesting to note some reader responses to an article supporting homosexuality published on the *China Daily* website. The article, entitled ‘Beijing youth pave way for gay marriage’, provided information regarding the increasing acceptance of homosexuality in China, and specifically Beijing.

“Beijing is becoming more ‘gay-friendly’ and attitudes towards homosexuality in China are changing, particularly among younger generation (sic)” (Ross & Sutherland, 2009).

Such ideas and information drew the ire of some readers who left comments about the article. One reader, identified only as Wit, said, “This is so outrageous. I hope the Party will do something about it to protect the normal citizens and decent morals.” Another, Cheng, said, “China is being attacked by western influence with lies and manipulated information. This (sic) activities can destroy a civilization.” But the beliefs of the reader’s are not what is important in this instance – the fact this article was published, along with other similar articles, is a huge leap forward in terms of media freedom and societal changes. McDonell (2009) insists positive stories, such as the increase in acceptance of homosexuality, are common in China.

“We’re not just doing stories about torture and mayhem, we want to be able to reflect the diversity of life here. And we do stories about what people think is funny and cool.”

However, it must also be recognised that McDonell, being a foreign correspondent, is reporting for an Australian audience. To broadcast such

stories in China domestically is still quite a challenge for journalists. McDonell (2009) also admits China has many serious problems that need to be addressed. He claims there are currently three major topics in the Chinese media, and most stories about these topics would never be allowed to be aired in China itself. “The environment, the economy, and issues dealing with freedom of expression are the 3 biggest issues in China. In one way or another, it seems almost every story works into that”.

In the past, the duty of the media in China, “...was not to indulge people with frivolity but to exhort or at least to help them concentrate their minds on socialist construction” (de Burgh, 2003: 40). While this concept may still hold some credence, it is clear the media industry in China is changing, and moving, very slowly, toward a freer, more liberal press. McDonell (2009) is certainly confident the media situation in China will continue to improve.

“A couple of years ago...the foreign ministry spokesman...said, ‘In China, we only have a forward gear. We don’t go into reverse.’ I kind of believed him at the time. I doubt it will go back. I’m optimistic about things in China”.

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