

# CHINA MEDIA BULLETIN

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## IMAGE OF THE MONTH

### Is RTHK History?

This cartoon published on April 5 by a Hong Kong visual arts teacher is part of a series called “Hong Kong Today.” It depicts a fictional Hong Kong Museum of History, which includes among its exhibits two institutions that have been critical to the city’s freedom, but are being undermined by Chinese and Hong Kong government actions. The first is the Basic Law, the mini-constitution guaranteeing freedom of expression and other fundamental rights; the other is Radio Television Hong Kong (RTHK), the once-respected public broadcaster now facing a government takeover. The teacher who posted the cartoon is facing disciplinary action from the Education Department.

Credit: [@vawongsir](https://www.instagram.com/vawongsir) Instagram



## ANALYSIS

# The Gutting of Hong Kong's Public Broadcaster

By Sarah Cook

Sarah Cook is the research director for China, Hong Kong, and Taiwan at Freedom House and director of its [China Media Bulletin](#).

## ***A government takeover of Radio Television Hong Kong has far-reaching implications.***

With ironic timing, the management at Hong Kong's public broadcaster Radio Television Hong Kong (RTHK) chose May 3—World Press Freedom Day—to initiate a spate of actions that flew in the face of the service's [mission](#) of providing impartial news coverage and a platform for free expression. Staff began [deleting all episodes](#) of past shows that were more than one year old from Facebook and YouTube, including several award-winning investigative programs that had garnered over a million views. The station then refused to renew the contract for journalist [Nabela Qoser](#), effectively [firing a reporter](#) who had gained prominence for her tough questioning of local officials. The moves came just days after top executives [axed a documentary](#)—months in the making—that highlighted the hard-hitting journalism and innovative business model of the digital news outlets *Hong Kong Free Press* and *Citizen News*.

Not so long ago, any of these steps would have seemed unimaginable at the widely respected and fiercely autonomous broadcaster. Today, they are just the latest in a series of disturbing changes that are draining the editorial independence and watchdog journalism out of RTHK—a death by a thousand cuts that has accelerated over the past two months.

For journalists, news consumers in Hong Kong, and others familiar with RTHK, each development brings a renewed sense of pain and loss as another of the territory's once renowned institutions becomes a shadow of its former self. But the fate of RTHK has more far-reaching implications, offering insights and warnings for anyone concerned about Hong Kong, media freedom, or Beijing's growing influence beyond the borders of mainland China.

## **Not your average Chinese broadcaster**

While the long-standing gap in press freedom between Hong Kong and the rest of China may be obvious, the stark contrast between RTHK and its mainland counterpart, China Central Television (CCTV), cannot be overstated. Whereas CCTV is supervised by the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) propaganda department, subject to tight editorial controls, and deployed as a key weapon in the party's [arsenal of repression](#) against critics and perceived enemies, RTHK followed the model of the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC), a publicly funded but editorially independent news service.

Established in 1928, RTHK today runs television channels in English, Mandarin, and Cantonese as well as seven radio stations. Its programs and documentaries have repeatedly won [awards](#) in Asia and [beyond](#). The schedule has traditionally included political satire, investigative reporting, current-affairs talk shows, and cultural content. In surveys as recent as 2019, RTHK scored highest among the territory's stations in terms

of [public trust](#), a reflection of the reputation it had garnered for credible, professional reporting, including on sensitive issues like the response of Beijing and the Hong Kong government to prodemocracy protests.

### **A hostile takeover**

Precisely because of RTHK's unflinching coverage of those in power, pro-Beijing officials have followed up on the passage of the National Security Law last year and the broader crushing of the prodemocracy movement in Hong Kong by moving to neutralize the broadcaster. What began as a government review and a series of isolated actions against individual journalists has [snowballed into a full-scale overhaul](#) of RTHK's policies and culture.

A key turning point occurred in [mid-February](#). After a government team published a detailed report criticizing the broadcaster's management, veteran reporter Leung Ka-wing stepped down as editor in chief, six months before the conclusion of his allotted tenure. He was replaced by Deputy Secretary of Home Affairs Patrick Li Pak-chuen, a civil servant with no prior media experience. Other government bureaucrats soon joined Li on the management team.

Within weeks, [three other senior RTHK employees](#) resigned, and Li announced an unprecedented policy—that all programs going forward would need to be reviewed and approved [personally](#) by him. At least [nine episodes](#) have since been blocked from airing at the last minute, and at least one full series has been suspended. The topics of the canceled programs include a writer speaking about whales, a hip-hop band, university student unions, mask shortages during the pandemic, police handling of 2019 antigovernment protests, and forthcoming [electoral changes](#) imposed by Beijing.

Such heavy-handed and arbitrary interference from management can fuel [self-censorship](#) on its own, but in early April, a new policy added [financial incentives](#): employees would have to foot the bill if executives decided not to air the content they produced, with the expenses taken out of their pay.

Even as RTHK granted less airtime to prodemocracy voices and government critics, particularly on Chinese-language programs, the broadcaster announced in late April that it would launch a new show hosted by Hong Kong chief executive [Carrie Lam](#)—to be aired four times a day—in which she would interview members of the handpicked Election Committee in the run-up to legislative polls scheduled for later this year.

### **Why it matters**

For journalists who have built up a career's worth of solid reporting, watching it being obliterated is heartbreaking. For Hong Kongers who have relied on RTHK as a credible news source, the loss is similarly palpable. And for businesses operating in the territory, the changes at the broadcaster raise questions about how and where government transgressions can now be investigated and exposed. But what has happened at RTHK also has implications beyond Hong Kong's shores.

First, those in China who aspire to greater press freedom and more trustworthy media

have looked to RTHK as an exemplar of what might be possible one day on the mainland. Its takeover by government operatives and its potential transformation into a government mouthpiece amounts to a demoralizing victory for Beijing's authoritarian model of media control.

Second, unlike recent violent attacks on media outlets and [journalists](#) in Hong Kong, for which the government might plausibly deny responsibility, the gutting of the public broadcaster is clearly a deliberate government action. RTHK's reduced editorial autonomy undermines any claims by Hong Kong officials that they still support media freedom and other democratic values, and foreign interlocutors can no longer take these assertions at face value.

Third, Hong Kong's freedoms—including press freedom—are predicated not only on its own Basic Law, but also on international agreements and treaties. These include the Sino-British Declaration as well as the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, which China agreed could continue to be in force in Hong Kong after the handover, although the PRC itself has signed but not ratified it. The government takeover of RTHK is part of a broader attack on independent journalism in Hong Kong that if allowed to go unchecked will undermine the credibility of the international human rights system more broadly. To the extent that Beijing is a party to such agreements, the fate of Hong Kong should serve as a warning about the sincerity of its international commitments on other topics, ranging from climate change to intellectual property rights.

Fourth, as China-linked companies, entrepreneurs, and even state-owned enterprises have begun purchasing stakes or otherwise investing in media outlets around the world, the gutting of RTHK should give pause to any current or potential partners. It demonstrates how quickly a respected and independent outlet can be brought to heel, despite the objections of veteran staff, journalists, and the public. The experience also reinforces the importance of investment screening mechanisms and reasonable limits on foreign ownership, at least for broadcast media, which many Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) countries have in place.

### **Not over yet**

Neither the journalist community nor average Hong Kongers are standing idly by as RTHK succumbs to government control. Some staffers have resigned rather than be forced to cooperate with the editorial shifts. Others are trying to navigate arbitrary red-lines and continue to produce content in the public interest, including about developments at the broadcaster itself. Much of the information above has come from RTHK's own reporting, or from employees quietly leaking details to other news outlets.

Elsewhere in Hong Kong, citizens and journalist associations have taken steps to push back. Netizens [scrambled](#) in early May to archive past programs on a blockchain platform before they were taken down. On May 6, RTHK [won](#) a Human Rights Press Award an award for a documentary about the July 2019 Yuen Long mob attack on protesters, with the organizers rejecting the outlet's retroactive efforts to withdraw from the honor and recognizing the work of journalist Bao Choy, who was convicted and fined last month for using a traffic database in her research.

Despite these principled stances, preserving remnants of RTHK’s editorial independence and investigative reporting will be an uphill climb. Without greater international pressure or a course correction on the part of top Hong Kong officials, RTHK seems likely to become either a government mouthpiece or a bland, toothless outlet focused [strictly](#) on entertainment and human interest stories. In any case, if the recent damage is allowed to stand, Hong Kong will have lost a true treasure.

## IN THE NEWS

### Regulators “clean up” internet ahead of CCP anniversary alongside censorship of Oscars, Bible apps, and Weibo

- Two million posts, fan groups, and push notifications targeted by censors:** The Cyberspace Administration of China (CAC) announced on May 1 it had ordered the deletion of two million posts for “historical nihilism,” which includes content that “denies the guiding position of Marxism...and the leadership of the Chinese Communist Party.” It [claimed](#) the posts contained “harmful” discussions of history that “polluted” the online environment. The CAC also [vowed](#) to crack down on [online fan groups](#) in support of celebrities and performers, which authorities described as damaging to teenagers. The body also [banned](#) some mobile apps from sending push notifications, claiming that some promoted information illegally, among other reasons. The State Council Information Office, in a May 8 press conference, [highlighted](#) the mass censorship operation ahead of the 100th anniversary of the founding of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP).
- Chloe Zhao Oscars win erased:** Censors [erased](#) online commentary celebrating Chinese-born director Chloe Zhao’s Oscars win on April 25 [across](#) all Chinese platforms, after nationalist netizens dug up a 2013 comment of Zhao’s that was critical of China. Related hashtags, her name, and the name of her film *Nomadland* were blocked on Weibo, WeChat, and Baidu; Sogou search engines; and other sites. Some online users [attempted](#) creative ways to bypass censors.
- World Press Freedom Day marked by censorship; other removals on Weibo and WeChat:** Censors on Weibo blocked the hashtag [#WorldPressFreedomDay](#), a reference to the widely recognized UN Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) initiative marked annually on May 3. Searches related to a May 1 Weibo post by the Central Political and Legal Affairs Committee’s account that had [mocked](#) India’s COVID-19 crisis were also [blocked](#), and the account of an individual who was trolled for criticizing the post was [deleted](#). On May 4, Weibo [banned](#) the account of a US-based former Chinese diplomat who had 300,000 followers for 90 days over his criticism of CCP policies, after regulators deemed the remarks illegal. WeChat censors also [deleted](#) an article marking the 13th anniversary of the Wenchuan earthquake in Sichuan Province, which killed some 70,000 people.
- Bible apps and accounts removed:** On April 29, authorities in China [removed](#) several

online Bible apps from app stores and [removed](#) several Christian WeChat accounts including those of Gospel Times, Gospel TV, Gospel League, WeDevote Bible, and Old Gospel. The removals were a product of [new rules](#) launched in January by the CAC governing “self-media.” [Christians](#) in China, particularly those worshipping outside of state-sanctioned institutions, often face high levels of surveillance, censorship, and persecution.

- **Stand-up comedy show fined for prohibited content:** The law enforcement arm of a government cultural agency in Beijing [fined](#) a comedy show 50,000 renminbi (\$7,800) for a production that used “vulgar terms” and “violated social morals.” According to the agency’s announcement, this is the [first time](#) Beijing stand-up comedy shows have faced such action over their content since the Ministry of Culture and Tourism issued [new rules](#) in September 2020 calling for greater regulation of live performances.

## Surveillance updates: Personal data-protection law advances, Apple compromises on user data, citizen backlash

- **Personal data-protection legislation advances:** On April 26, the National People’s Congress Standing Committee [released](#) for comment the second [draft](#) of the Personal Information Protection Law, which will become China’s first data-privacy law if passed. Under the draft, certain tech platforms would be required to form an “independent body” staffed with nonemployees to oversee the handling of personal data, allow users to block personalized ads, and prevent state organs from “[exceeding] the scope or extent necessary to fulfill their statutory duties and responsibilities” when handling personal information—though that wouldn’t restrict the vast collection of personal data for law enforcement purposes. Around the same time, the Ministry of Industry and Technology, the National Information Security Standardization Technical Committee, and the Cyberspace Administration of China released a series of related draft regulations and standards, including one for [facial recognition](#) on April 23, one for [mobile applications](#) on April 26, and one for [smart cars](#) on May 12, respectively. The regulations largely focus on protecting users from excessive data collection and misuse of personal data by tech companies and nongovernmental organizations, though they may also apply to parts of the government.
- **Apple’s compromises in China aid government surveillance efforts:** As Apple prepares to open a new set of data centers in China this summer, an extensive *New York Times* [report](#) revealed details of the dubious compromises the company made to comply with China’s 2017 [Cybersecurity Law](#). The company [agreed](#) to move Chinese user data to the servers belonging to a Chinese state-owned company and to keep the encryption keys to this data on Chinese soil—placing all Chinese Apple users at risk of surveillance. Since June 2017, Apple has admitted to providing the contents of an undisclosed number of iCloud accounts to the Chinese government on nine

occasions; though [since](#) May 2020 its Chinese-state owned partner, Guizhou-Cloud Big Data, legally owns all Chinese user data and could hand it over without a formal government request. The investigation also revealed that Apple has removed roughly 55,000 apps from the Chinese app store, far more than the 1,217 apps previously disclosed (as it does not report apps that it proactively removes based on its “blacklist”). A separate [report](#) by consulting company Horizon Advisory pointed to similar culpability Amazon could face in terms of aiding domestic Chinese surveillance, including via a network of cloud-computing data centers and innovation hubs it hosts in China, often with Chinese-government partners. One company at a Shanghai innovation center, for example, offers products like facial-recognition capabilities that link to Ministry of Public Security databases.

- **Citizen backlash over surveillance:** As restaurants around China are switching to exclusive QR-code ordering, citizens are [increasingly required](#) to hand over personal information to the restaurants’ apps, including their phone number, birth date, and gender, usually without a privacy policy or user agreement to explain why and how their data is collected and stored. The practice has led to customer complaints, according to an investigation by *The Paper* from March. Separately, on April 27, citizen backlash compelled Chinese television maker Skyworth to apologize and cancel its partnership with a targeted advertising firm after it was [revealed](#) that one of their smart TVs frequently harvested data from devices in the same local network, including device names and IP addresses.
- **Mobile apps violate privacy rules:** On May 1, the CAC called out 33 apps including from major companies like Tencent, Baidu, and Sougou for collecting data [not relevant](#) to their services, in violation of [new regulations](#) that define the “necessary personal information” mobile internet applications can collect. The CAC gave companies 10 days to rectify the unauthorized data collection to avoid facing financial penalties. The 33 apps included text-input apps, map and navigation apps, and a platform-distributed sales and marketing information. On May 21, the CAC [publicly identified](#) a further 105 apps for violating the regulations.

## **Criminal charges for COVID commentary, Uyghur religious expression, Tibetan WeChat use**

- **Indictment and trial for COVID-19 expression:** On May 11, a Beijing court [tried](#) citizen journalists Chen Mei and Cai Wei on allegations of “picking quarrels and provoking trouble,” a charge commonly used against activists, for their efforts to document the COVID-19 pandemic in China. The two had saved censored news articles about the pandemic on their GitHub page, Terminus2049. Police initially seized the two in April 2020; authorities later forced them to accept government-appointed lawyers, who declined to initiate a defense during a [rapid trial](#) lasting only 100 minutes and which ended without a verdict being pronounced. In another case, on May 11 activist Guo Quan was [indicted](#) on national-security-related charges of “inciting subversion of state power” for his online comments about COVID-19 in January 2020. He

is expected to face trial and eventual conviction; Guo was [released](#) in 2018 after 10 years in prison for previous political activism.

- **Two arrested for communicating with Tibetans in exile on WeChat:** Tibetans Samten Sangpo and Tsultrim were [arrested](#) by local police in a Tibetan autonomous area in Qinghai Province on April 16, on charges apparently related to communicating with Tibetans outside the country on WeChat. The development came amid reports that police in the area have increased monitoring of Tibetans in recent months to see if they have been communicating with Tibetan exiles. Officials have reportedly held meetings to threaten people against these communications, and offered large cash rewards to people who report such behavior by their neighbors.
- **Deaths and detentions of Uyghurs and Turkic Muslims for religious expression:** A May 13 [report](#) from the Uyghur Human Rights Project documents 1,046 cases in which Turkic religious figures have been detained in camps or prisons in Xinjiang since 2014 for their religious teachings or activities, including communicating with people abroad or “spreading religious propaganda.” It further found that 18 of them had died in a camp or prison, or shortly after being released from these facilities. Separately, on May 11, Radio Free Asia [confirmed](#) the death of Uyghur activist Rebiya Kadeer’s sister, Arzugul Kadeer. The report said she had died in 2017 shortly after being released from a camp where she was detained in apparent retaliation for the outspoken overseas activism of her sister. Rebiya Kadeer, who is based in the United States, has said that 38 of her family members have experienced some form of detention by Chinese authorities.
- **Retaliation against “HK12” lawyers:** Chinese authorities have retaliated against several lawyers who [represented](#) 12 Hong Kong activists apprehended and detained in the mainland as they attempted to flee Hong Kong by boat to Taiwan. On April 23, Yang Hui [received](#) a 280,000 renminbi (\$43,500) fine from Xiamen authorities for selling used books online without approval, in what appears to be retaliation for his legal work. In another case, on May 8, Lu Siwei, who was stripped of his legal license in January for trying to represent one of the Hong Kongers, was stopped at the Shanghai airport and [banned](#) from leaving China to start a fellowship in the United States on grounds that his travel would “endanger national security.”
- **Two Chinese Australians—a journalist and a writer—face spying charges:** According to an April 28 [report](#), in recent months anonymous WeChat posts and videos have emerged, attacking Australian citizen and former state-run China Global Television News (CGTN) anchor Cheng Lei. The posts accused Lei, who was formally arrested in February on state secrets charges and is being detained in a Beijing prison, of being a spy. Experts quoted in the article believe the posts to be written by the Ministry of Public Security, “to set the public tone.” Some of the accounts had also engaged in a [smear campaign](#) against the Chinese Australian journalist Vicky Xu Xiuzhong. In separate case, a Chinese court [will put](#) Australian writer Yang Hengjun on trial on May 27 on “espionage” charges. Authorities have never publicly presented evidence against Yang though he wrote articles [calling](#) for democratic reform in China.



## HONG KONG

### Website blocks, netizen arrests, journalist beating, and Phoenix TV ownership change

The Hong Kong government continued to clamp down on human rights in the territory, including by once again banning the annual [June Fourth vigil](#) on health grounds related to the spread of COVID-19; launching a [national security probe](#) into a prominent civil society organization; and introducing new rules on [oaths](#) for elected officials that resulted in resignations of prodemocracy district councilors. The following are additional such incidents, related to media and internet freedom:

- **Taiwanese websites blocked:** Hong Kong police blocked three Taiwanese websites beginning on April 24, though two became [accessible](#) three days later, according to local media. One site, the Presbyterian Church in Taiwan, had [reportedly](#) raised money for Hong Kong protesters, but the other two had no clear link to the territory. On May 7, Hong Kong's Leisure and Cultural Services Department [banned](#) nine books in public libraries, including books by former lawmakers. Since the National Security Law came into effect on June 30, 2020, Hong Kong authorities have blocked two other websites in [January](#) and [February](#) 2021 and [banned](#) books in July 2020, though self-censorship fears over the NSL has led to the [cancellation](#) of numerous events.
- **Arrests and punishment for online political content:** On May 5 and 6, Hong Kong police [arrested](#) five members of a school group between the ages of 15 and 24 for “subversion,” over comments on a [Facebook group](#) and support for Hong Kong independence. The “Returning Valiant” group described itself as “an organization composed of revolutionary flames” and at one point had [set up](#) a street stall to distribute leaflets. In a separate case, a visual arts teacher [said](#) the Education Department upheld a complaint against him for professional misconduct over 10 political cartoons he had drawn and posted on social media. He faces being stripped of his teacher registration as a result.
- **New laws on doxing and fake news coming:** On May 11, the Constitutional and Mainland Affairs Bureau [introduced](#) a paper proposing new legal amendments to the Personal Data (Privacy) Ordinance make doxing punishable by up to five years in prison and a HK\$1 million (US\$128,000) fine. The proposed law would also empower the Office of the Privacy Commissioner to order that content be removed. Overseas websites will be [required](#) to abide by the legislation, and if they refuse to remove content, the websites could be banned and local staff arrested. The bureau said the amendments will be translated into a bill and submitted to the Legislative Council (Legco) this year for a vote. Shortly before the doxing amendments were released, Chief Executive Carrie Lam [announced](#) on May 4 that the government was working on “fake news” legislation. The digital news site Post 852 [announced](#) on May 14 it was suspending operations, with the founder acknowledging the outlet's financial struggles but pointing to the expected “fake news” law as the primary catalyst for the decision. He consequently dismissed the outlet's entire staff.

- **Journalist assaulted, as index shows media conditions reaching record low:** On May 11, an unidentified attacker [assaulted](#) a Hong Kong-based *Epoch Times* journalist with a bat outside her apartment complex. The attack comes after the *Epoch Times* printing press was [broken into](#) and damaged by unknown assailants last month. The Hong Kong Journalists Association (HKJA) condemned the attack and called for police to investigate and bring the perpetrators to justice. The HKJA on May 3, [released](#) its 2020 Hong Kong Press Freedom Index, which showed that 91 percent of journalists surveyed believed press freedom had worsened since the previous year. The index's overall score for the year was the lowest on record.
- **Media ownership changes as pro-Beijing Phoenix TV sold, Jimmy Lai's Apple Daily shares frozen:** On April 18, Phoenix Television founder Liu Changle [sold](#) his 38 percent stake in the company to Chinese state-owned Bauhinia Culture Holdings and the Hong Kong-Macau company Shen Tuk Holdings, making the majority of Phoenix TV state-owned. Three new directors were brought in, all of whom are [believed](#) to have previously worked for the central government in Beijing. In another shakeup affecting media ownership, the Hong Kong government [froze](#) shares in Next Digital held by Jimmy Lai, who owns the prodemocracy *Apple Daily* newspaper, under the National Security Law. Lai is in jail [awaiting](#) trial on national security charges, and concurrently serving a prison sentence related to a protest during the 2019 prodemocracy movement.

## BEYOND CHINA

### Beijing's COVID-19 media strategy, waning propaganda impact in Europe, new US regulations to enhance transparency

- **China used COVID-19 to influence foreign media:** A new [report](#) released on May 12 by the International Federation of Journalists (IFJ) found that the Chinese government and state media activated their existing transnational media system—which includes training programs for journalists, content-sharing agreements, and ownership of local publishing platforms—to plant positive narratives globally about China's response to the COVID-19 pandemic. The report pointed out that as Beijing worked to spread its preferred narrative about the virus, it simultaneously ejected foreign reporters, resulting in a lack of independent coverage of COVID-19 inside China. Fifty-six percent of the journalists from the 50 countries interviewed said that coverage of China in their country has become more positive.
- **Network of inauthentic accounts amplifies China's official messaging:** An [investigation](#) by the Associated Press and the Oxford Internet Institute released May 11 found that 26,879 fake accounts, many of which impersonated ordinary non-Chinese citizens, had retweeted Chinese diplomats and state media almost 200,000 times from June 2020 to January 2021. More than 10 percent of the retweets of Chinese diplomats came from accounts that Twitter suspended on March 1 for

violation of platform rules, reinforcing speculation that the Chinese government is deliberately using inauthentic accounts to boost state-sanctioned content. Today, there are at least 270 Chinese diplomats in 126 countries active on Twitter and Facebook, and together with Chinese state media, they control 449 accounts on the two platforms, posting nearly 950,000 times during the investigation period. Meanwhile, Twitter and Facebook remains blocked in China.

- Chinese language disinformation about the United States, Taiwan circulate:** In late April, a [video](#) of a prison riot in Ecuador circulated online with Thai and Chinese subtitles that falsely claimed the violence depicted an anti-Chinese racist attack in Los Angeles. The video fueled viral anger amongst the Chinese diaspora in Thailand, Taiwan, and China. In a similar vein, Taiwanese authorities [exposed](#) a falsified Taiwan Presidential Office memo in simplified Chinese that started circulating on April 15, and claimed that Taipei had agreed to receive nuclear wastewater from Fukushima, Japan. Taiwan's president [said](#) it was a "typical cognitive warfare tactic," implying it had Chinese state links. On May 17, social media analytics firm Graphika released a [report](#) detailing exiled Chinese businessman Guo Wengui's central role in online disinformation and harassment campaigns against anti-CCP dissidents in six countries, including the United States, despite promulgating anti-CCP narratives himself.
- Report finds decline of China's soft power in Europe:** An April 2021 [report](#) from the European Think-tank Network on China (ETNC) concluded that the Chinese government's efforts to enhance its image in 17 European countries and European Union institutions had been failing. As a result, the government's messaging became more assertive in order to prevent negative criticism, rather than improve its likeability. Similarly, a [report](#) from Russian outlet Meduza found that there was very little local interest in the large amounts of Chinese propaganda placed in Russian outlets, partly due to a shortage of qualified personnel and the propagandists' tone-deaf and clumsy approach.
- US regulation enhances transparency of foreign media:** On April 22, US communications watchdog the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) [mandated](#) that American broadcasters disclose programs sponsored or paid for by a foreign government. The directive reflected a broader attempt to crack down on increased efforts by Chinese and Russian media to promote certain narratives and to, sometimes covertly, inject state-run content into mainstream news outlets. Foreign Agents Registration Act (FARA) disclosures reveal that China [spent](#) \$64 million on foreign influence spending in 2020, the most of any country. On May 5, Chinese state media Xinhua officially [registered](#) as a foreign agent for the first time, [revealing](#) \$8.6 million in payments since March 2020 from Xinhua headquarters to its US subsidiaries. This latest US push for transparency [follows](#) that of other countries like Australia and Ireland.

## FEATURED PUSHBACK

### Netizens demand transparency on Chengdu student's death

Following the death on May 9 of 16-year-old high student Lin Weiqi, who fell to his death from the Chengdu No. 49 Middle School building, [online outrage](#) sparked by his mother's heartfelt post on Weibo propelled the case to national prominence and elicited a [public response](#) from Education Bureau authorities. The bureau's statement that no criminal action took place and "the student took his own life due to personal problems"

fueled further demands for information. The mother's initial [post](#) (see image), which questioned the school's delay in informing her of her son's death, why she was not allowed to view the surveillance footage, and why she had been barred from the school grounds—was shared over a million times.



Despite [warnings](#) by authorities and state media not to "spread rumors," netizens expressed persistent doubts about the official narrative on the boy's death. Millions of people joined the discussion online, with a related hashtag garnering 1.9 billion [views](#) on Weibo. People unhappy with the official response even took the rare step of [protesting](#) in person outside the school on May 11, despite the risk of arrest, chanting that they wanted "the truth." The protest was later broken up by police. Persistent national attention to the case eventually compelled authorities to [release](#) some of the surveillance camera footage to state media, which [produced](#) a [reconstruction](#) of the evening.

The pushback against the official narrative reflects distrust among netizens for some official accounts and state-run media, and official reactions may have exacerbated that skepticism. [Accusations](#) from the Sichuan cyber police unit that the outcry was caused by "interference from hostile forces at home and abroad" prompted some online users to make [comments](#) like, "all I wanted was to know the truth, and now I've become an enemy of the state."

## WHAT TO WATCH FOR

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- **Crackdown surrounding June 4 anniversary:** June 4 marks the 32nd anniversary of the military crackdown on student protesters and civilians in Tiananmen Square in Beijing and other cities in China in 1989, and is among the dates considered most sensitive by the CCP. For the second year in a row, the Hong Kong government has [banned](#) the annual vigil from taking place. Watch for a familiar [crackdown](#) in the mainland on anyone who tries to mark the anniversary online or offline, including censorship of key words and extralegal house arrest for the mothers of victims, as well as arrests in Hong Kong or mainland China of activists who attempt to gather in person or hold a memorial online.
- **Corporate complicity in rights abuses:** Recent [revelations](#) in *The New York Times* laid out the scale of Apple's censorship and surveillance complicity with the CCP, while investigations into other American companies like [Oracle](#) and Amazon demonstrate similar ties with Chinese law enforcement. In Hong Kong, 40 percent of respondents to an American Chamber of Commerce 2021 [survey](#) replied that they think the business environment will remain unstable or get worse. Watch for the corporate sector's response to demands from Chinese and Hong Kong authorities to censor, surveil, or remain silent in the face of rights abuses, and how corporate sponsors of the Beijing Olympics will handle international consumers increasingly vocal concern about the Olympic pageantry taking place against a backdrop of human rights violations in Xinjiang and elsewhere with demands from nationalist pro-CCP netizens in China for the companies to stay silent.
- **Europe's increased caution regarding CCP influence:** Several European governments that previously enjoyed robust ties with China have expressed growing concern about Chinese state influence in technology, with [Romania](#) and [Germany](#) passing legislation at the end of April barring Huawei from the 5G sector. Watch for further wariness in Europe about Chinese state investment in the media and tech sectors, further passage of legislation on 5G suppliers, and fallout from the [suspension](#) of the Comprehensive Agreement on Investment after China sanctioned European parliamentarians.

## TAKE ACTION

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- **Support a prisoner:** Learn how to take action to help journalists and free expression activists, including those featured in passed issues of the *China Media Bulletin*, [here](#).
- **Visit the *China Media Bulletin Resources* section:** Learn more about how policy-makers, media outlets, educators and donors can help advance free expression in China and beyond via a [new resource section](#) on the Freedom House website.

### For more information

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- For archives, go to: [www.freedomhouse.org/China-media](http://www.freedomhouse.org/China-media)
- For additional information on human rights and free expression related to China, see: *Freedom in the World 2021*, *Freedom on the Net 2020*, *Beijing's Global Megaphone*, and *The Battle for China's Spirit: Religious Revival, Repression, and Resistance under Xi Jinping*



Freedom House is a nonprofit, nonpartisan organization that supports democratic change, monitors freedom, and advocates for democracy and human rights.

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