

CHINA MEDIA BULLETIN

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IMAGE OF THE MONTH

Law Discussion Can't Escape Censors

This screenshot [shows](#) a livestreamed discussion on Chinese platform Bilibili about the legal implications of new [rules](#) under which artists can be banned from performing over their speech or behavior. The conversation drew 3.8 million viewers before censors shut it down. The event was hosted by a think tank and featured law professors from the top law school in the country. After Bilibili abruptly ended the livestream, the organizers [unsuccessfully](#) tried to restart it on Tencent Conference, the Good Lawyer app, and Weibo livestream. Weibo later banned the account of the event's organizers, Hongfan Institute of Law and Economics.

Credit: [China Digital Times](#)



ANALYSIS

Information Controls at the Beijing Olympics: What to Watch For

By Sarah Cook

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With the eyes of the world turning to China, the government is focused on dictating what they see.

As Beijing prepares to open the 2022 Winter Olympics on February 4, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) leadership will be dialing up the world's most sophisticated apparatus of information control, using censorship, surveillance, and legal reprisals to curb political, religious, and other speech that deviates from the party line. This apparatus has grown dramatically in the years since Beijing hosted the 2008 Summer Games. Indeed, Freedom House's [Freedom on the Net 2021](#) report found that China's government was the worst abuser of internet freedom globally for the seventh year in a row, earning the country a dismal 10 points on the report's 100-point scale.

These conditions could have serious implications for athletes and journalists and for the Chinese public more broadly. The following are five types of restrictions to watch for before, during, and after the games:

- 1. Surveillance of athletes and journalists:** The 2008 Beijing Olympics notably served as a catalyst for upgraded surveillance, and more recently the COVID-19 pandemic has prompted further expansion. Governments and international human rights groups are already warning this year's Olympic attendees to take precautions. The [Dutch](#), [British](#), [Australian](#), and [US Olympic Committees](#) have suggested that athletes and staff leave their phones and laptops at home or offered temporary devices for use during the games to enhance security and protect personal data. Similarly, the Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ) has prepared a [safety advisory](#) for reporters, urging them to take clean personal devices to China, to open new email accounts for use during the trip, to "assume your hotel room is under surveillance," and to "avoid installing the Chinese app WeChat ... since it is likely to collect a lot of data, including messaging and calls." On January 18, an [investigation](#) published by the Toronto-based Citizen Lab validated such concerns, finding that the My2022 app, mandatory for all attendees to install as part of the games' COVID-19 protocols, included vulnerabilities that could facilitate exposure of personal data, such as sensitive medical information. In addition, the app carries features that enable users to report one another for sharing politically sensitive content. Such openings for surveillance on apps that ostensibly serve other purposes have been revealed in China before—including on a [Xi Jinping propaganda study app](#) and a [COVID-19 health code app](#). It remains to be seen whether the security gaps in the My2022 app will be sealed and whether other evidence of surveillance will be exposed.
- 2. Reprisals for political speech and independent reporting:** The presence of a user reporting mechanism in the MY2022 app highlights the regime's nervousness about

attendees speaking publicly on topics other than the sporting event itself. The [Olympic Charter](#) places some restrictions on demonstrations and political propaganda during medal ceremonies or competition. But [new rules](#) allow such expression on the field of play before competition, and athletes are free to air their views when speaking to the press or on social media platforms. During the Tokyo Games, one [US athlete](#) engaged in a protest on the medal podium, prompting organizers to announce that they were looking into potential sanctions, while two Chinese cyclists were warned over [Mao badges](#). But in China's legal environment, the consequences of outspokenness could be much more grave. On January 18, an official for the [Beijing Organizing Committee](#) warned of "certain punishment" for any behavior or speech that is against "Chinese laws and regulations." This leaves open the possibility of legal reprisals not only for acts of protest at Olympic venues, but also for comments about human rights or criticism of Chinese leaders in front of the international press or on social media platforms like Twitter and Facebook, which will be accessible at Olympic venues even as they are blocked in the rest of China. CPJ also warns reporters about the use of unofficial virtual private networks (VPNs), noting that "accessing an unlicensed VPN could be used against you if officials are looking for an excuse to penalize you." Given the international profile of the games, prosecution of an Olympic athlete seems unlikely, but an outspoken journalist or athlete could easily face expulsion. Meanwhile, local residents in mainland China and Hong Kong, who express views perceived to threaten the positive image the Chinese government wishes to portray, could face legal penalties. Last summer, Hong Kong police [detained a man](#) who booed during the Chinese national anthem when watching the Tokyo games at a shopping mall.

3. **Rapid censorship of any scandals, even those unrelated to the Olympics:** China's leaders might feel compelled to quickly suppress any number of unfavorable news stories, such as revelations that Olympic attire was produced with Uyghur forced labor, athlete complaints about an Olympic venue, or unsportsmanlike conduct by a favored Chinese athlete. Censors' responses could include interrupted television broadcasts, massive deletion of social media posts, or bans on online comments. The Citizen Lab [analysis](#) of the MY2022 app, whose functionalities include real-time chat and news feeds, found evidence of a latent censorship keyword list that flags phrases like "Dalai Lama," "Holy Quran," or "Falun Dafa is good," as well as references to Chinese government agencies and Xi Jinping. The feature was inactive at the time of the investigation, but it could be activated by the Beijing Organizing Committee, especially if a protest or scandal erupts. Moreover, censors will be on high alert to quash any other unfavorable news from across China, with potentially life-threatening consequences for ordinary people. It was such instructions ahead of the 2008 Beijing Games that delayed reporting on tainted [milk for infants](#), contributing to the death or illness of hundreds of thousands of babies. As the Omicron variant spreads, officials will also be tempted to cover up news related to COVID-19, whether it involves new outbreaks or lockdowns gone awry, and to detain those trying to share unofficial information.
4. **Stonewalling foreign journalists:** In addition to heavy-handed restrictions, the Chinese government is adept at using more subtle methods to obstruct or disincen-

tivize independent reporting. Officials could simply delay invitations, invoke onerous health protocols, or fail to approve foreign journalists' applications for access to certain events, venues, or outspoken athletes until it is practically impossible for even approved reporters to attend. Authorities might also grant Chinese state media privileged access to a given location or event, forcing international media to rely on them for coverage. A [November 2021](#) statement by the Foreign Correspondents' Club of China relayed a sample of 10 such incidents reported by American, European, and Asian journalists when they attempted to cover preparations for the games. The journalists said they encountered access denials, filming interruptions, monitoring by plainclothes police, last-minute notifications, and verbal abuse by an official following mention of human rights boycotts in a television story about an Olympic venue.

5. **Repercussions after the closing ceremony:** Even if the CCP and its information control apparatus are on their best behavior during the games, there will be many opportunities for reprisals after the sporting event has concluded. For example, a journalist who reported about the Chinese government's abuses could be denied a visa renewal, or local Chinese citizens who serve as translators or news assistants for foreign media could face criminal charges, as [Bloomberg](#) news assistant Haze Fan has since December 2020. Departing athletes, coaches, and other attendees may also begin to reveal pressure to self-censor or unsavory encounters with the Chinese police state once they feel more free to speak. Meanwhile, Chinese activists and religious believers who were quietly targeted for harassment and detention as part of the heightened security controls surrounding the games could receive formal sentences of years in prison. Already, activist Guo Feixiong and lawyer Xie Yang have been charged with "[inciting subversion](#)" this month, and [Xu Na](#), a Falun Gong practitioner and artist whose husband was killed in custody around the 2008 games, was sentenced to eight years in prison in early January for sharing information about the state of the pandemic in Beijing.

International pushback

The Chinese government can be expected to engage in some form of heightened information control during the Olympic Games, but it is less clear how international actors will respond. Will any athletes, perhaps after completing their competitions, publicly voice concerns about the plight of persecuted Uyghurs, Tibetans, Hong Kongers, Falun Gong practitioners, Chinese rights activists, or even a fellow athlete like Peng Shuai? Will international media outlets broadcasting the games limit their coverage to the sporting contest itself, or will they offer context on the political, social, and legal environment in which the games are taking place?

If the Chinese government and Beijing Organizing Committee blatantly violate terms of the [contract](#) they signed with the International Olympic Committee (IOC), such as its guarantees of media freedom and prohibitions on discrimination based on religion or political opinion, how will the committee react? Or if an athlete does speak out about rights violations in China, will corporate sponsors stand by them or cancel contracts for fear of a backlash from Beijing?

Fortunately, many news outlets have already referenced rights violations against Uyghurs and others in their pre-Olympic reporting, a growing list of governments have announced diplomatic boycotts, and tenacious activists worldwide are trying to raise even more awareness. In this sense the CCP has been less than successful in quashing debate and reporting on the darker side of its rule ahead of the games. In the true Olympic spirit of fairness and human dignity, one can only hope that this trend continues past February 4.

IN THE NEWS

2021 Year in Review: Censorship, propaganda, and surveillance trends in China

In 2021, during which the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) celebrated its 100th anniversary, its informational control system continued to adapt to promote party objectives and [suppress](#) free expression and independent reporting.

- Top censored content:** Beijing’s censorship system, aided by technology companies, [crowdsourcing](#), and artificial intelligence, proved capable of [reacting](#) quickly to events on the ground while also systematically deleting content that violated long-standing taboos. Social media platforms, online portals, search engines, and app stores removed content that criticized the CCP, its rule, and the “moral” direction of the country, and channels that enabled the freer flow of information. Censors blocked the [Clubhouse](#) app, an article by former premier Wen Jiabao, online [labor rights activism](#), references to the first Chinese woman to win the best director [Oscar](#), the deadly aftermath of flooding in [Zhengzhou](#), actress [Zhao Wei](#), and prominent [#MeToo cases](#). Censors worked to [shut down](#) support for unapproved social causes before they could gain momentum, including by censoring hashtags related to “Support Xinjiang People” during the [backlash](#) against fashion brands divesting from Xinjiang cotton over its links to forced labor, and the “[lying flat](#)” counterculture movement, which emphasizes a passive approach to life that undermines government efforts to foster a hardworking youth. Nationalistic netizens, operating with tacit support from the government, attacked [science blogs](#) such as Science Squirrel Club, PaperClip, and Elephant Magazine; [feminists](#); and university [LGBT+ societies](#) as “anti-China,” leading to the closure of their online accounts and websites.
- Top propaganda narratives:** In early January, the Cyberspace Administration of China (CAC) released a [list](#) of “top ten” online keywords and phrases that [highlighted](#) the CCP’s top propaganda narratives of 2021. The list included domestic issues like the [CCP’s 100th anniversary](#), the party’s [sixth plenum](#), development of the digital economy, and antitrust regulations. It also served as a reflection of how important the CCP considers its global propaganda efforts. “Community of Shared Destiny in Cyberspace,” referring to the party’s goal of influencing the international internet governance system, came in fifth on the list; eighth was “International Communi-

cations,” referring to Xi’s push to [create](#) a “trustworthy, loveable, and respectable” image of China abroad. To achieve these propaganda objectives at home and overseas, the Chinese government has [increasingly turned](#) to foreign influencers based in China to produce propaganda. The influencers rarely disclose the support they get from the Chinese government, including access to areas closed to independent reporters; amplification of their content on state media and diplomatic social media accounts; and in some cases, free hotels or outright payment. Some popular YouTube influencers work for state media, but their accounts are not labeled as being government linked.

- **Pressure on tech:** The party continued to rein in China’s technology giants in 2021 with new legislation and crackdowns. Authorities passed regulations restricting private collection of [nonessential personal data](#); a [Data Security Law](#); China’s [first-ever](#) privacy law, the [Personal Information Protection Law](#) (PIPL); and rules for [algorithm-based recommendations](#)—the [first legislation](#) on algorithms anywhere in the world. That law bans companies from including false information or “fake news” in their recommendations, a label that in China is often applied to truthful reporting critical of the government. The laws and regulations passed in 2021 make genuine efforts to address grassroots demands for data protection, albeit with exemptions that allow law enforcement agencies to continue operating their vast surveillance systems. But additionally, authorities continued to launch heavy-handed crackdowns to enforce existing and new laws and regulations, and as a result, the [numbers of apps](#) in China’s app stores has dropped by almost 40 percent over the past three years. Companies like Douban, Zhihu, and Weibo have been [fined](#) by authorities for allowing “illegal” information on their platforms; in December regulators [banned](#) Douban’s app from app stores, citing such violations.

Controlling the narrative on the Xi’an lockdown, Peng Shuai, having kids, democracy

- **Pandemic lockdown-related dissent, censorship, propaganda:** The 13 million residents of Xi’an turned to Weibo to [express anger](#) about a stringent COVID-19 lockdown that began December 23. The hashtag #DifficultToBuyFoodInXian received over 370 million clicks by January 2, 2022, and posts went viral about two women who had miscarriages and a man who [died](#) of a heart attack after hospitals refused to admit them in light of COVID testing rules. The CCP’s mouthpiece *People’s Daily* [reposted](#) a video of one of the pregnant woman on its social media accounts, helping it to go viral, and indicating that Beijing was unhappy with how local officials handled the lockdown. Several officials [were punished](#) over the fiasco. Beginning January 4, Xi’an officials [banned](#) residents from posting about the pandemic, and placed three individuals in [detention](#) for up to 7 days on charges of “picking quarrels and provoking trouble,” an offense commonly used in free expression cases, in response to their complaints on WeChat about the lockdown’s financial consequences. Meanwhile, the Xi’an government launched a high-profile propaganda

[campaign](#) depicting government agents delivering food to residents; in a video clip obtained by Radio Free Asia, a recipient was instructed to thank the government on camera. After lockdowns were enacted in Tianjin Municipality and Henan Province in January, officials in Beijing maintained that they were pursuing a [“dynamic clearing”](#) policy rather than a “zero-COVID-19” strategy, an apparent move to distance the central government from blame for any local mishaps.

- **#WhereIsPengShuai silenced in China:** While concerns over the whereabouts of Chinese tennis star Peng Shuai made global headlines for weeks, leading to the [unprecedented move](#) from the Women’s Tennis Association to pull out of China on December 1, the conversation was largely muted within China. Half an hour was all it took for Chinese censors to [remove](#) a November 2 Weibo post by Peng accusing ex-vice premier Zhang Gaoli of sexual assault. Censors then quickly [scrubbed](#) several hundred keywords tied to the event, keeping pace with creative substitutes that netizens devised to discuss the scandal. [None](#) of the visual “evidence” that the Chinese propaganda machine presented to international audiences to prove Peng’s safety was viewable within China. Many who were aware of the incident [succumbed](#) to self-censorship even in private online groups, not wanting to be banned from their WeChat accounts, which are essential to accessing a wide range of daily services in China.
- **CCP guidance to have more children prompts backlash:** A November editorial published on China Reports Network saying that Communist Party members are obliged to have three children was shared and viewed over [5.7 million times](#) in the second week of December, in a rare case of state-run commentary going viral. Netizens pushed back against the directive, with many saying party members were “ordinary people” who could not afford more children. The article was eventually deleted, though screenshots and associated hashtags persisted on Weibo. On January 12, Chinese economist and online celebrity Ren Zeping was [banned](#) from posting on Weibo after suggesting that the central bank create a “fertility fund” to encourage more births.
- **China is a “democracy” too:** Ahead of US president Joe Biden’s “Summit for Democracy” on December 9, Chinese state media went on a blitz targeting both international and domestic audiences with [claims](#) that the CCP’s “dictatorship serves democracy.” The domestic propaganda push included a [white paper](#), a [documentary](#), a [Weibo](#) campaign, and a [book](#) by President Xi Jinping on human rights that was distributed in China. Globally, Chinese state media and diplomatic officials amplified the message on [Twitter](#) and via an [op-ed coauthored](#) with a Russian diplomat.

Prison sentences and psychiatric detentions for disseminating news, critical narratives

- Citizen journalist gets eight years for COVID-19 reporting:** On January 16, 2022, citizen journalist and Falun Gong practitioner Xu Na was [sentenced](#) to eight years in prison and fined 20,000 renminbi (\$3,100) on [charges](#) of “undermining the implementation of the law.” The penalty was imposed for [sending](#) photos and information about COVID-19 restrictions in Beijing to the *Epoch Times*, an overseas newspaper founded by practitioners of the Falun Gong, a spiritual practice banned in China.
- Four years for Tibetan writer:** In October 2021, Tibetan intellectual Lobsang Lhundup (pen name Dhi Lhaden) was [sentenced](#) to four years for “disturbing social order” in a secret trial for publishing a book that advocated for protest within the existing social order. A former monk, he was [detained](#) in 2019 in Chengdu, where he had been working at a private cultural center.
- Three and a half years for streaming site founder:** On November 22, 2021, a Shanghai court [meted out](#) a 3.5 year sentence and a 1.5 million renminbi (\$230,000) fine to Liang Yongping, founder of popular streaming site Renren Yingshi. Officially convicted over copyright violations, Renren Yingshi [had been](#) one of the largest providers of Chinese-language subtitles for uncensored foreign films and television programs, which are strictly controlled in China.
- Three years for human rights lawyer:** On December 14, 2021, a Guangxi court [sentenced](#) human rights lawyer Chen Jiahong to three years in prison for “inciting subversion” for [posting](#) social media comments criticizing the CCP and calling for democratic reforms. Chen was sentenced without a lawyer present, and his claims of abuse during detention were ignored by the court.
- Three years for ex-prosecutor turned activist:** In a closed-door session on November 17, 2021, an Anhui court [sentenced](#) former procurator Shen Liangqing to three years in prison on charges of “picking quarrels and provoking trouble” for his Twitter and Facebook posts and his earlier [writings](#) on abuses in the CCP disciplinary system.
- Up to two years for Mao supporters:** In late December 2021, a Henan court [handed down](#) sentences ranging from nine months to two years to five members of the online “Red Culture Association” for “picking quarrels and provoking trouble.” The court cited their sharing of over 100 articles on WeChat that decried Chinese leaders like Deng Xiaoping for departing from Mao Zedong’s vision. The events may signal a crackdown on the far-left in advance of the 20th Party Congress, when Xi Jinping will formalize his precedent-breaking third term as leader of the CCP.
- Teachers detained, fired for questioning official history:** On December 16, 2021, Shanghai Aurora College [fired](#) journalism lecturer Song Gengyi and Qingdao Uni-

versity revoked a staffer’s teaching license after both had questioned official narratives on Sino-Japanese history. Additionally, Hunan officials [involuntarily committed](#) teacher Li Tiantian to a psychiatric facility on December 19. Li had expressed sympathy for Song online, though officials may have also sought a reason to confine her over a 2019 article that was critical of rural education in China. Released after five days in the face of public outrage, Li was [placed](#) under close surveillance and five activists who tried to visit her were assaulted by village authorities. On January 11, 2022, one of the activists—prominent human rights lawyer Xie Yang—was [detained](#) on charges of “inciting subversion.”

HONG KONG

Destruction of independent media, jail for June 4th Facebook post, threats to global outlets

The assault on Hong Kong’s civil society and prodemocracy movement escalated in 2021, with more than 50 organizations [disbanding](#) to avoid their members’ likely arrest. December’s Legislative Council elections, the [first held](#) under the National Security Law (NSL), further reflected Beijing’s authoritarian influence in Hong Kong and turned the legislature into an effective rubber-stamp body. Other major incidents from the crackdown on free expression over the past month in Hong Kong include:

- Journalists arrested, eight outlets close or suspend news operations:** Hong Kong’s independent media suffered a devastating blow at the close of 2021. On December 28, police officers [arrested](#) seven journalists and executives from Stand News, an independent digital news site, on suspicion of “conspiring to publish seditious material” over its reporting since 2019. The outlet announced it was shutting down that day and [deleted](#) its Twitter account, which had 115,000 followers, and its [website](#), erasing content globally. The day before the Stand News raids, authorities had [charged](#) seven *Apple Daily* executives and staff including owner Jimmy Lai with “seditious publishing.” Legal scholars [say](#) the use of sedition crimes, enacted under the British colonial-era Crimes Ordinance, indicate that Hong Kong authorities are diversifying the legal tools used in their crackdown to frighten residents into keeping silent. The use of the sedition crime against content published before the NSL came into effect also allows authorities to avoid criticism about the NSL being applied retroactively. Following the raids on Stand News, five other independent Chinese-language digital news outlets [announced](#) they were shutting down: [Citizen News](#), [Mad Dog Daily](#), [IBHK Internet Media](#), [Hong Kong Independent News](#), and [Polymer](#). Two other outlets, [inmediahk.net](#) and [Dare Media HK](#) stopped accepting submissions and ended news reporting, respectively. Online users have been [trying](#) to [back up](#) deleted news content.
- Public broadcaster RTHK transformed into state media:** With the dismantling of independent news sites, the media environment in Hong Kong is increasingly dominated by Beijing-friendly content. The government-owned Radio Television Hong

Kong (RTHK), formerly a public broadcaster before the [government dismantled](#) its independence, has begun to suppress coverage of major news stories censored on the mainland. RTHK [deleted its report](#) on Peng Shuai on November 23, [did not mention](#) the 1989 Tiananmen Massacre while reporting on the removal of statues dedicated to the victims from university campuses, and [announced](#) it would “pause” social media pages of 12 shows that had been canceled; it remains unclear whether RTHK will eventually delete them.

- **Prison for social media post:** On January 4, activist Chow Hang-tung was [sentenced](#) to 15 months in prison on charges of “incitement to knowingly take part in an unauthorized assembly.” The charge related to a Facebook post calling on residents to light a candle on June 4—the anniversary of the Tiananmen Square massacre—after authorities banned a vigil. Chow’s sentencing came shortly after Hong Kong’s Court of Final Appeal had [ruled](#) that the NSL’s strict bail conditions apply to other offences as long as the case involves acts endangering national security. The ruling is a blow to due process rights in Hong Kong, and reflects the territory’s judicial system aligning more closely with the mainland’s, where bail is routinely denied.
- **Hong Kong officials threaten international media:** Government officials sent letters to the editors of the *Wall Street Journal* and the UK *Sunday Times* with [threats](#) of prosecution over their critical coverage of December’s Legislative Council elections. While the Hong Kong government has long sent [“clarification” letters](#) parroting propaganda and CCP talking points, the letters sent on December 1 and December 8, respectively, claimed Hong Kong’s Elections (Corrupt and Illegal Conduct) Ordinance ban on inciting another person not to cast a ballot or to cast an invalid ballot applied globally, and threatened legal action. In November, Hong Kong authorities [denied](#) an Economist journalist a visa, and Beijing’s foreign ministry office [denounced](#) the Foreign Correspondents’ Club in Hong Kong over its annual survey, which showed declining press freedom.

BEYOND CHINA

Growing evidence of CCP influence in global media; transnational repression

- **New evidence of CCP media influence in Europe and North America:** A November report from Sinopsis on CCP influence in Italy [found](#) that state-run China Radio International (CRI) made breakthroughs in mainstream Italian media networks in 2020, with reports from CRI journalists regularly featured on RAI and Mediaset TV during the early stages of the COVID-19 pandemic. In the United Kingdom, the *Daily Mail* [reported](#) that the wife of a former British foreign secretary presents a cultural show on the [China Hour](#) series. China Hour is produced by Chinese state media and a British company and broadcast on Sky TV and has produced shows that praised the CCP response to the COVID-19 pandemic in Xinjiang and neglected to mention the massive human rights violations authorities are committing there. Reports from

the Atlantic Council's [Digital Forensic Research Lab](#) (DFRLab) and Canadian research group [DisinfoWatch](#) found evidence of Chinese state-linked disinformation on WeChat targeting diaspora Chinese communities during Canada's September 2021 federal elections. The accounts spread false or misleading information about a politician who had [introduced](#) a bill to create a foreign-influence registry, though the bill did not pass. In the US state of Virginia, China Global Television Network (CGTN) [paid](#) a local radio station \$4.4 million to broadcast state-produced propaganda and promote it on social media between July 2019 and August 2021, according to filings it made under the Foreign Agents Registration Act (FARA). [Recent research](#) examined the Chinese embassy's links to pro-Beijing resolutions passed in the New York State Senate, including a [resolution](#) in 2019 to commemorate *Sing Tao Daily New York*, a pro-Beijing paper that the US Department of Justice [required](#) to register as a foreign agent in 2021.

- Government strategies to monitor and shape global public opinion:** Several reports have unveiled CCP strategies to manipulate global public opinion on social media. On December 20, the *New York Times* [reported](#) on Shanghai police bidding documents that showed the department is paying private companies to create fake accounts on Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube that push out positive content overseas; identify pseudonymous critics; and amplify state content in order to manipulate recommendation algorithms. The company that won the bid charged about \$11,000 monthly. A December 31 *Washington Post* [investigation](#) revealed over 300 Chinese government projects since the start of 2020 using software to conduct mass surveillance on international social media platforms such as Facebook and Twitter, in violation of those company's policies. The software targets "key personnel from political, business, and media circles" and Uyghurs and other ethnic minorities and sets off alarms if it detects negative content. This could potentially allow officials to know when to deploy inauthentic bots to push out positive content. An [investigation](#) by the China Media Project found that at least six Chinese influencers active on Facebook removed information identifying that they were state media journalists, and that nine journalists had bought ads to boost their followers. It was [revealed](#) in early December that the Chinese consulate in New York paid a public relations firm \$300,000 to hire influencers on Instagram, Twitch, and TikTok to boost the Beijing Olympics and spread pro-Beijing narratives.
- Transnational repression developments see Uyghurs facing removal to China, intimidation of Hong Kongers abroad:** On January 3, Saudi Arabia began preparing to [deport](#) two Uyghur detainees—Nurmemet Rozi and Hemdullah Abduweli—to China, where they face likely imprisonment and torture, according to Human Rights Watch. In another case, [United Nations experts](#) and several [domestic](#) and [international](#) NGOs called on the government of Morocco to halt the pending extradition of a Uyghur journalist [Idris Hasan](#) (Chinese name: Yidiresi Aishan) to China, citing the risk of serious human rights violations. He had been arrested on an Interpol red notice that was later canceled. All three men had Turkish residency. Hong Kongers in the United Kingdom have [reported efforts](#) to silence them, including a WeChat group circulating an anonymous £10,000 (\$13,560) bounty for the addresses of two

activists and calls to physically attack them. In November, pro-Beijing individuals [attacked](#) a group of Hong Kong demonstrators in London who were denouncing the Chinese government. Many Hong Kongers say they fear both government agents and pro-Beijing members of the diaspora community who appear to agree with authorities' view that the National Security Law applies globally.

- **Deepening partnerships between Chinese state media and Latin American, African, Arab media groups:** On December 2, CGTN and more than 30 Latin American media organizations [launched](#) the “China-LAC Media Action” initiative, which will establish [cooperative projects](#) with CGTN to create online forums, coproductions of documentaries, screenings, and youth-focused talk shows. On December 6, the head of the CCP’s propaganda department [spoke](#) at the fifth China-Arab States Forum on Radio and Television Cooperation in Beijing, calling for deeper China-Arab media cooperation. In Africa, Chinese company StarTimes, which provides digital and satellite television to over 30 countries, has a [training program](#) for dubbing Chinese television shows and films into local languages; one Tanzanian actor works in Beijing dubbing programs into Swahili. Cooperation deals do not necessarily translate into local media producing Beijing-friendly content, as reflected in [subdued coverage](#) of Chinese foreign minister Wang Yi’s recent visit to Kenya, Eritrea, and the Comoros.

FEATURED PUSHBACK

Preserving history and culture amid CCP efforts to erase memory

The Chinese Communist Party (CCP) has long issued its own version of Chinese history that suppresses many distinct cultural identities and narratives. However, members of exile communities, diaspora groups, and their supporters have launched various initiatives to raise awareness of and preserve and cultural identity, with some gaining international attention in recent months.



The national security crackdown in Hong Kong featured police raids on the Tiananmen Massacre memorial museum and its eventual [closure](#), as well as the [removal](#) of statues from university campuses dedicated to victims. In response, activists are raising funds to build a permanent memorial in the United States. Former student leader Wang Dan and 58 other supporters are [aiming](#) to raise \$500,000 to rent a space in New York and \$2 million for a permanent museum.

In Turkey, Uyghur students created a [museum](#) in Istanbul to show what a “reeducation” camp in Xinjiang is like. Among its exhibits is a tiger chair, a torture device commonly found in Chinese detention centers. A [cultural center](#) is planned for Ankara, while cultural and religious centers have been set up in the [United Kingdom](#), [France](#), [Canada](#), the [United States](#), [Australia](#), and [Kazakhstan](#), among other places. There are also online initiatives like the [Uyghur Collective](#) that act as community hubs and preserve Uyghur culture and identity.

Separately, the Tibet Museum in India is run by the Tibetan government in exile, and is a [member](#) of the International Coalition of Sites of Conscience.

Chinese dissident artist Badiuca, who is based in Australia, [held](#) an exhibit at the Museum of Santa Giulia in the Italian city of Brescia. The exhibit, which opened November 13, showcased his work highlighting censorship, Chinese dissidents, pandemic-related rights abuses, and the crackdown on freedoms in Hong Kong. Ahead of the opening, the Chinese Embassy in Rome contacted the mayor demanding the exhibit be shut down, but he and the museum refused. They [replied](#) to the embassy that Brescia “always championed freedom of expression and would continue to do so.”

WATCH TO WATCH FOR IN 2022

- **Heightened content controls for the Olympics, Party Congress:** Major political events will take place in 2022, among them the Beijing Winter Olympics in February and the 20th Party Congress in the autumn at which Xi Jinping's third term will be cemented. Authorities have been tightening controls and refining propaganda methods in preparation. Watch for new regulations, like introduction of a [fine](#) of over \$75,000 for unauthorized use of virtual private networks (VPNs), and the [increased sophistication](#) of Chinese government content on social media platforms like Douyin (China's version of TikTok) that resembles celebrity influencer videos.
- **Hong Kong's media sector further resembling the mainland's:** With the destruction of independent Chinese-language press including public broadcaster RTHK in 2021, this year Hong Kong officials will likely turn their attention toward English-language media, trade groups, and foreign journalists based in the territory. Watch for state media attacks or legal prosecutions targeting *Hong Kong Free Press*, a potential sale of the *South China Morning Post*, a police [crackdown](#) on the Hong Kong Journalist Association (HKJA) and Foreign Correspondents Club of Hong Kong, and whether foreign journalists face further visa delays or nonrenewals.
- **Physical and cyberattacks on overseas critics:** The Chinese government's increasing [transnational repression](#)—the targeting of exiles and overseas critics to silence them—will likely pick up as the regime tries to control the narrative around the Olympics and party leadership congress. Democracies should watch for increased [cyberattacks](#) against critics, [physical attacks](#) of protesters denouncing CCP abuses, and other [threats](#), while taking measures to protect dissidents in their countries.

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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

- For archives, go to: 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*



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