Despite Bo Xilai defiance, media coverage of trial is closely controlled

Journalist arrested amid national crackdown on antigraft and reform activism

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Online antirumor principles listed, microblogger arrests widen

Despite censorship, China’s WeChat app reaches 100 million users abroad

PHOTO OF THE WEEK: NOTHING TO SEE HERE
Despite Bo Xilai defiance, media coverage of trial is closely controlled

The trial of purged Chongqing Communist Party chief Bo Xilai took place in Jinan, Shandong Province, from August 22 to 26 (see CMB No. 91). The proceedings differed considerably from many observers’ expectations and from past politically sensitive trials, including those of Bo’s wife, Gu Kailai, and his former police chief, Wang Lijun. Among other unusual features, the trial lasted more than one day; the defendant appeared defiant, denying the charges of bribery, embezzlement, and abuse of power; and the court granted him and his lawyers an opportunity to cross-examine witnesses. Nonetheless, coverage of the trial in traditional media was closely controlled. Foreign journalists were kept out of the courtroom, and only 19 Chinese state media journalists were among the 100 people present. The flagship China Central Television (CCTV) evening news program did not mention the trial until its third day, while newspapers in Chongqing kept it off the front pages, though newspaper coverage was prominent in other parts of China. Per propaganda directives, most news reports consisted primarily of wire copy from the official Xinhua news agency or other state media sources, as journalists were forbidden from independently reporting on the case. Earlier speculation that a live video feed would be provided to journalists in a nearby hotel did not materialize, but in an unprecedented move, the court released periodic updates and selected excerpts of the proceedings via its Sina Weibo microblog account (see below). In their coverage, state media sought to demonize Bo with labels like “tricky, domineering, and double-dealing,” while taking great pains to frame the trial as an example of the rule of law. Xinhua, the nationalist *Global Times*, and other sources published commentaries praising the trial’s transparency and fairness. Despite Bo’s strident rejection of the charges against him, the focus of the case remained on family conflicts and relatively small-scale bribery allegations, avoiding matters that might touch on broader official corruption, party infighting, or human rights abuses. Moreover, in his closing remarks, Bo himself acknowledged the legitimacy of the proceedings, investigation, and judicial system, rather than straying into critiques of the party or top leaders. Ding Xueliang, a professor of Chinese politics in Hong Kong, likened the trial to a martial arts demonstration, in which “you hit somebody in the face, he hits you back, but eventually nobody gets badly injured and the result has been previously discussed and managed.”

- *China Digital Times* 8/23/2013: [Ministry of Truth: The Bo Xilai trial (5)]
- Xinhua 8/28/2013: [Xinhua Insight: Details of Bo Xilai’s trial](
- *Guardian* 8/22/2013: [Bo Xilai trial coverage: controlled by the court, but extraordinary](
- *Tea Leaf Nation* 8/27/2013: [Actor, trickster, rogue: Chinese discuss the many faces of Bo](
- *South China Morning Post* 8/26/2013: [Bo Xilai’s trial (day 5): Wang Lijun defected after exposure of illicit relationship with Gu Kailai, says Bo](
- *Wall Street Journal* 8/24/2013: [China’s Bo coverage: Extensive and selective](
- *China Digital Times* 8/22/2013: [Ministry of Truth: The Bo Xilai trial (4)]
- *China Digital Times* 8/21/2013: [Ministry of Truth: The Bo Xilai trial continued](
- *China Digital Times* 8/20/2013: [Ministry of Truth: The Bo Xilai trial](

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Journalist arrested amid national crackdown on activism

Liu Hu, a journalist with the Guangzhou-based daily Xin Kuai Bao, was detained by Beijing police on August 23 at his home in Chongqing. He was charged with “spreading false rumors” after he wrote on his microblog that Ma Zhengqi, deputy director of Chongqing’s chamber of commerce and industry, should be investigated for corruption. Liu’s microblog account was shut down, his computers were seized, and he was taken to Beijing by the police. The arrest came amid a broader crackdown on independent anticorruption activism, which contrasted with the Communist Party leadership’s public efforts to rein in graft among officials (see CMB No. 91). The campaign has also ensnared advocates of political and other reforms. According to Human Rights Watch (HRW), the Chinese government has arbitrarily detained at least 55 activists since February this year. Among other cases, prominent Guangzhou-based lawyer Guo Feixiong has been held since August 8 for “gathering crowds to disturb public order” (see CMB No. 74). HRW said his right to legal counsel has been denied by the authorities on national security grounds, leaving him more vulnerable to torture in custody. And it was reported on August 11 that prominent reform advocate Yang Lin, a signer of the Charter 08 prodemocracy manifesto, had been arrested for “inciting subversion of state power.” Separately, Zhang Xuezhong, a law lecturer at Shanghai’s East China University of Political Science and Law, was notified by the school’s Communist Party committee on August 17 that he was being dismissed from his teaching position because of an article he had published in June. The school claimed that his writing, which criticized the party’s ongoing campaign against calls for constitutional rule in China (see CMB No. 91), had “violated the constitution,” but Zhang argued in response that he was merely exercising his constitutional right to freedom of expression.

- China Digital Times 8/21/2013: Journalists, lawyers targeted as Xi tightens control
- Reporters Without Borders 8/28/2013: During Bo Xilai trial, journalist arrest for reporting corruption
- Sina Hong Kong 8/26/2013: 記者劉虎涉嫌制造傳播謠言被拘 被押一級看守所 [Journalist Liu Hu detained for reportedly spreading rumor, held in detention center]
- Radio Free Asia 8/29/2013: Shanghai lawyer suspended over constitutional campaigns
- Human Rights Watch 8/30/2013: China: Nationwide arrests of activists, critics multiply
- Reuters 8/11/2013: China arrests activist on subversion charge as crackdown deepens

Beijing indie film festival forced to cancel screenings

The Beijing Independent Film Festival (BIFF), which was set to open in Songzhuang on the outskirts of Beijing on August 23, was forced to call off its planned screenings under official pressure. The festival was organized by the Beijing-based Li Xianting Film Foundation, whose film school was shut down by the police in July (see CMB No. 90). Event director Wang Hongwei, who was reportedly threatened with imprisonment, said he had negotiated with the authorities to carry on
with the festival, but with crucial concessions. Invited guests and panelists were allowed to attend discussion sessions and take away DVD copies of films that had been scheduled for screening. However, the movies could not be shown to audiences of “fewer than two people or more than five.” The 2011 BIFF was forced to change venues and harassed by police, while the 2012 festival was thwarted by a mysterious loss of electrical power during the opening screening. China’s independent film industry is frequently subject to official harassment because it tends to explore social and political issues that are deemed sensitive by the government. Selected from 300 submissions, this year’s BIFF films addressed themes that ranged from ethnicity to sexual identity.

- **Time Out Beijing 8/31/2013:** Beijing Independent Film Festival cancelled. Kind of...
- **P.I.G. China 8/23/2013:** Beijing cinephiles cross their fingers: BIFF preview
- **Indie Wire 8/20/2012:** Beijing indie film festival goes dark after record turnout, heads underground

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**Government introduces mandatory Marxism classes for journalists**

In its latest move to guide public opinion, the Chinese government has announced that the country’s more than 300,000 working journalists would be required to take classes on Marxism through January 2014. According to an article released by the official Xinhua news agency on August 26, the decision was issued in June by four government and party agencies: the Central Propaganda Department, the State Council Information Office, the State General Administration of Press, Publication, Radio, Film, and Television (SGAPPRTF), and the state-run All-China Journalists Association. An official in charge of the training program said the internet had changed China’s media environment, making propaganda efforts “increasingly difficult” and producing young journalists whose “ideological and political qualities vary greatly.” A journalist with state broadcaster China Central Television (CCTV) who had attended a three-hour Marxism training session in late June questioned its relevance for modern journalism. “I think it’s more about ideology, and very little about journalism theory or practice,” he commented. David Bandurski of Hong Kong University’s China Media Project said the instruction was likely to focus on the Marxist view that journalism’s purpose is to serve the party and guide public opinion, rather than seek the truth and inform the public. The initiative comes amid a broader ideological campaign launched by Communist Party leader Xi Jinping in June (see CMB No. 89).

- **South China Morning Post 8/27/2013:** China orders nation’s journalists to take Marxism classes
- **Global Times 9/2/2013:** Marxist training for reporters
- **Xinhua 8/26/2013:** 广泛深入开展新闻战线马克思主义新闻观培训 [Marxism training program helps develop deeply rooted news line]
- **Wall Street Journal 8/28/2013:** Marxist school now in session for Chinese journalists
Censorship directives restrict reporting on protests, corruption, and deadly clashes

Since early August, the Communist Party’s local and national propaganda departments have reportedly issued numerous directives to media outlets to prohibit, limit, or downplay coverage of sensitive news events. The directives, leaked and posted online by the California-based China Digital Times, related to incidents ranging from riots and corruption to a deadly ammonia leak. On August 13, the authorities barred media outlets from reporting or commenting on accusations of corruption involving top Shanghai police officials, describing the allegations as “online rumors.” Censorship directives issued on August 15 limited media to using only official sources, rather than independent investigations, when reporting on violent antigovernment protests by villagers in Anhui Province who were angered by government inaction following a severe drought. Similarly, on August 18, the Central Propaganda Department directed media to use only copy provided by the official Xinhua news agency when reporting on a letter signed by 70 police officers accusing senior Shanghai judge Cui Yadong of graft. Search results for the term “Cui Yadong” were subsequently blocked on the popular social-media platform Sina Weibo. After news broke of a securities-trading scandal involving Chinese brokerage firm Everbright Securities, Guangdong Province’s Propaganda Department on August 20 ordered media to publish only information provided by official sources and not “hype” the case. Several directives imposed news blackouts on incidents that involved fatalities, including in the restive northwestern region of Xinjiang. On August 8, the Central Propaganda Department warned that media were “absolutely forbidden” from covering Xinjiang clashes that reportedly left three dead and 20 injured, possibly after police opened fire on residents who were expressing outrage over the arrest of four Uighur Muslims for engaging in religious activities. Directives dated August 30 prohibited publication of news about a violent raid, also in Xinjiang, on an unconfirmed “terrorist cell” that reportedly resulted in 22 deaths. Separately, following a deadly ammonia leak at a Shanghai refrigeration plant that killed 15 people and left 26 ill, censorship authorities on September 1 ordered media to “downplay” the fatal mishap.

- China Digital Times 8/11/2013: Ministry of Truth: Violence in Xinjiang on Eid
- China Digital Times 8/13/2013: Ministry of Truth: Rumored Shanghai mobsters
- China Digital Times 8/17/2013: Ministry of Truth: Flipping cars in Anhui Province
- China Digital Times 8/18/2013: Ministry of Truth: 70 accuse Cui Yadong of graft
- China Digital Times 8/23/2013: Ministry of Truth: Bad trades and fake thirds
- China Digital Times 9/3/2013: Ministry of Truth: August 20 clash in Kashgar
- Associated Press 8/28/2013: China confirms raid on alleged terror cell
Online antirumor principles listed, microblogger arrests widen

In a further move to combat online “rumors,” the government-sponsored China Internet Conference, held in Beijing from August 13 to 15, produced a resolution laying out the so-called “seven base lines” for a “healthy online environment” (see CMB No. 21). According to the official Xinhua news agency, the seven principles to which online content must conform are legal regulation, the socialist system, the national interest, citizens’ rights and interests, public order, morality, and information accuracy. The noticeably subordinate placement of “information accuracy” suggests that the guidelines are meant more to suppress content that clashes with the Communist Party’s political priorities than to limit the spread of falsehoods. The conference’s initiative targets in particular employees in the internet industry, celebrities, and prominent bloggers who are known as “big Vs” due to their popularity and the fact that their identities have been verified by web administrators. In an August 26 editorial, the Communist Party mouthpiece People’s Daily said the “big Vs” have become an amplifier of “big rumors” in China, as their accounts are followed by millions of users. According to the article, the “seven base lines” would help these writers disseminate “real information.” However, criticism of the antirumor crackdown has emerged in recent weeks, as hundreds of users ranging from ordinary individuals to major commentators have been investigated and arrested. On September 2, Song Huichang, a professor at the Communist Party’s Central Party School, wrote in the party newspaper Study Times that attempts by the leadership to “gag the people’s voices” would end in revolt, citing examples from China’s ancient history. Meanwhile, amid the large numbers of cases and confusion as to what constitutes a violation, the Guangzhou police and several other law enforcement institutions in Guangdong Province used their official microblogs to express frustration with excessive repression of “rumors.” The posts were widely shared before being deleted. On August 23, Charles Xue, a Chinese American businessman who is known for his web commentaries—under the name Xue Manzi—on China’s social and political issues, was detained for allegedly soliciting prostitutes. Amid uncertainty surrounding his case, netizens speculated that Xue, a “big V” with more than 12 million followers, was being targeted by authorities for his ability to sway public opinion on the internet.

- Diplomat 9/3/2013: China intensifies crackdown on social media rumors
- China Media Project 8/27/2013: China’s ‘seven base lines’ for a clean internet
- Xinhua 7/28/2013: 七条底线全体网民应共守 [All netizens should follow the seven base lines]
- People’s Daily 8/26/2013: 谨防大V变大谣 [Beware of big-V rumors]
- South China Morning Post 9/3/2013: Critics of ‘rumour’ crackdown point to history, as police voice dissent online
- Offbeat China 8/27/2013: Will the detention of prominent Weibo celebrity Xue Manzi shut China’s ‘big V’ bloggers up?
- Bloomberg 8/27/2013: China’s top tweeters under fire
Court’s microblog updates of Bo Xilai trial spark online discussions

As the trial of purged Chongqing Communist Party leader Bo Xilai opened on August 22 (see above), the court began posting updates and quotations from the proceedings on its microblog account and more detailed transcripts on its website. The approach—and the content of the posts—caught many observers and netizens by surprise, particularly as it became apparent that Bo was not going to meekly accept the charges against him and was adeptly cross-examining the prosecution’s witnesses. Despite the ostensible transparency, the published excerpts were selective, omitting statements that touched on high-level official involvement in the response to former Chongqing police chief Wang Lijun’s defection to a U.S. consulate, which ultimately led to Bo’s ouster, or on the use of abusive interrogation tactics against Bo. Nevertheless, the court’s releases fueled a lively online conversation, as the trial became the top-trending topic on Sina Weibo on August 22 and the court transcript posted on the Netease web portal garnered over 24 million views. The number of users following the court’s microblog account quickly swelled to several hundred thousand, though this is a small percentage of the country’s users. Reactions ranged from admiration for Bo’s defiance to criticism of the prosecutors for their fumbles in linking him to his wife’s corruption. The most common response was surprise. “I was dumbfounded by the transcripts,” wrote one user quoted by the e-magazine Tea Leaf Nation. “What a huge twist… we shall see how this ends,” noted another. Some posts expressing support for Bo were reportedly deleted. Taken as a whole, the authorities’ handling of the trial coverage exemplified what researchers at Hong Kong University’s China Media Project have termed “Control 2.0,” combining tight restrictions on independent reporting with more transparency and breaking-news updates from approved government sources in order to shape coverage and online conversations. If the aim was to limit the scope of discussion to the salacious details of Bo’s family life—like the exotic meat his son brought back from a trip to Africa—and direct attention away from the systemic roots of corruption or human rights abuses, the authorities appeared to have succeeded. But if the purpose was to discredit Bo, they may have failed, as many netizens praised his eloquence and knowledge of the law, questioned the competence of the prosecutors, and remarked that the $3.5 million in bribes Bo allegedly received was dwarfed by the amounts often cited in corruption cases involving lower-level officials.

- Sina 8/22/2013: 薄熙来案 8 月 22 日庭审实录(全文) [Bo Xilai case August 22 trial record (full text)]
- South China Morning Post 8/26/2013: Bo Xilai’s trial (day 2): Bo says wife ‘crazy’, perjured against him under duress
- South China Morning Post 8/26/2013: Bo Xilai trial transcripts censored, sources say
- BBC 8/27/2013: China media: Bo Xilai trial
- CNN 8/23/2013: China: Xilai trial by social media
- Daily Beast 8/23/2013: Bo Xilai’s perfect show trial
- Tea Leaf Nation 8/22/2013: You can’t handle the truth: Bo Xilai’s courtroom performance wins fans
INNER MONGOLIA

Mongol netizens punished for ‘rumors’ on migration of Chinese settlers

The municipal Public Security Bureau of Ulaanhad in the Inner Mongolia Autonomous Region reported on August 7 that administrative penalties had been imposed on at least 13 individuals for spreading online “rumors” about alleged government plans to relocate a million ethnic Chinese from Sichuan Province to Inner Mongolia. In a microblog post, the bureau said the rumors had disturbed online order and affected social stability. Two days later, a statement posted by the regional Public Security Bureau reiterated that the migration plan was a “pure rumor” initiated by “foreign hostile forces,” and confirmed that those who spread it had been “detained, warned, and educated.” On August 29 the regional bureau reported dozens of other netizen arrests for spreading alleged rumors on various topics, apparently in connection with a nationwide antirumor campaign (see above).

According to the New York–based Southern Mongolian Human Rights Information Center (SMHRIC), netizens in Inner Mongolia have increasingly used social media to protest Beijing’s policies in the region (see CMB No. 39). Recent posts ranged from photos of ethnic Chinese waiting to register their residency in Inner Mongolia to cartoons of Mongols defending their land. Despite the official denials, the SMHRIC cited anecdotal evidence of significant migration, as well as past reports in state media—specifically in the wake of the 2008 Sichuan earthquake—that made mention of development plans involving the relocation of Sichuan residents to Inner Mongolia.

- Radio Free Asia 8/12/2013: Mongolian netizens ‘punished’ for Chinese resettlement complaints
- SMHRIC 8/12/2013: Netizens punished as Southern Mongolians protest Chinese immigration
- SMHRIC 9/4/2013: 52 netizens arrested for ‘spreading rumors’, ‘sensationalizing conflicts’, and ‘stirring up ethnic relations’

HONG KONG

Former pro-Beijing newspaper chief named to head TV station

Louie King-bun, former executive editor in chief of the pro-Beijing Hong Kong newspaper Ta Kung Pao, took up the executive director position at Asia Television (ATV) on September 2. He was appointed after his predecessor, James Shing Pan-yu, was ordered to resign by the territory’s media regulator on August 31. According to a report released by the Communications Authority on August 23, Shing had violated licensing terms by allowing major investor Wong Ching, a relative of his, to meddle with the station’s day-to-day operations. The investigation also imposed a HK$1 million (US$130,000) fine on ATV. Louie, who had joined the station as vice president in 2012, had drawn controversy in December after ATV Focus, a show he managed, ran harsh comments about the student group Scholarism for its campaigns against a mainland-oriented national education plan (see
CMB No. 90. According to *South China Morning Post*, Louie has begun recruiting employees from Ta Kung Pao to join his team. On September 2, a former ATV anchor wrote on her Facebook page that she had left the station in part because of increasing self-censorship in favor of the Hong Kong government. ATV is one of just two companies with a license to operate in the territory’s free-to-air television market, and efforts to issue additional licenses have met with repeated delays (see CMB No. 87).

- *South China Morning Post* 9/3/2013: [New ATV boss Louie King-bun faces early test of ethics](#)
- *Standard* 9/2/2013: [ATV backs down](#)
- *South China Morning Post* 9/2/2013: [James Shing quits role as ATV’s executive director](#)
- HKJA 7/7/2013: [Dark clouds on the horizon: Hong Kong’s freedom of expression faces new threats](#)

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**BEYOND CHINA**

Despite censorship, China’s WeChat app reaches 100 million users abroad

The popular Chinese mobile-phone messaging platform WeChat announced on August 15 that it had passed 100 million registered accounts outside China (see CMB No. 91). The service, which recently featured Argentine soccer star Lionel Messi in its international commercials, has about 235.8 million monthly active users in total—a 176.8 percent year-on-year increase. A report published by Chinese state media on August 25 said that unlike other Chinese social-media platforms, including Sina Weibo and Tencent’s QQ, WeChat, which is also owned by Tencent, is popular among foreigners. According to data released by London-based Global Web Index in August, WeChat was ranked the fifth-most-downloaded mobile application in the world, after Google Maps, Facebook, YouTube, and Google+. Its top overseas markets are Indonesia and Malaysia. Despite its popularity, the service has continued to adhere to Beijing’s censorship rules by providing both a “sanitized” version, known as Weixin, for mainland users and an international one for users abroad. Within China, prominent rights activist Hu Jia said in May that his contacts were deleted after he discussed citizen rights on the platform, and investigative journalist Luo Chanping, who is known for his revelations of official corruption, had his account deleted. Even the international service has reportedly engaged in censorship to some extent. Accounts surfaced in January that overseas users were having trouble sending out messages containing words that are often blocked on China’s internet (see CMB No. 78). And according to Global Voices, ChinaGate, a popular overseas Chinese-language web portal that is blocked in China due to its uncensored content, opened a U.S.-based WeChat account in August that was suspended after just two days. WeChat users who attempted to follow the site were led to a message that read, “This account has violated WeChat admin platform policies and has been forbidden from using all official account features.”

- The Next Web 8/15/2013: [WhatsApp rival WeChat surpasses 100 million user accounts outside China](#)

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NOTABLE ANALYSIS

Harvard study outlines diversity of social-media censorship methods

On August 28, three scholars from Harvard University published a paper summarizing the results of a study of social-media censorship in China. The researchers created dozens of accounts on different platforms and in different parts of China. They also set up their own social-media site, gaining unusual insight into censorship technologies and methods as they communicated with firms that provide censorship software. The study found that social-media sites employ a variety of censorship and review options to identify posts for potential deletion, and that they are given relative freedom to choose which methods to adopt, prompting speculation that this is how the government promotes innovation and competition in the field of content control. The authors note that a popular method—especially among government-run websites—is to use “sensitive” keyword detection not only to target posts for deletion, but also to identify them for prepublication review by human censors. Separately, the research appears to reinforce the findings of an earlier study indicating that a post’s perceived potential for collective action is more likely to prompt censorship than expressions of antigovernment sentiment per se. The study does not, however, provide additional insight regarding censorship motivated by a desire to suppress specific allegations or independent investigation of official wrongdoing.

- Harvard University 8/28/2013: A randomized experimental study of censorship in China

For additional information on human rights and free expression in China, see:
- Freedom in the World 2013
- Freedom of the Press 2013
- Freedom on the Net 2013

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