

CHINA MEDIA BULLETIN

2015 YEAR IN REVIEW

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PHOTO OF THE YEAR

The Most Censored Meme of 2015



An image of Winnie the Pooh in a toy car—a spoof on photos of President Xi Jinping inspecting troops during a military parade—emerged as the most censored post of the year on the microblogging platform Sina Weibo. It was shared over 65,000 times within just 70 minutes before being deleted by censors. The parade itself was one of the most intensely controlled topics of 2015, with 6 out of the top 20 most censored Weibo posts relating to the event. Netizens have repeatedly compared Xi to Winnie the Pooh [since 2013](#). Credit: [Weiboscope](#) / [The Nanfang](#)

FEATURE

China's most censored news topics in 2015

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Throughout 2015, on an almost daily basis, Chinese Communist Party (CCP) and state entities relayed detailed instructions to news outlets, websites, and social media administrators on whether and how to cover breaking news stories and related commentary. A recent Freedom House analysis of dozens of these directives reveals that the subject areas targeted for censorship by Chinese authorities are far broader than mere criticism of the regime, dissident activities, or long-standing taboo issues.

Although the directives are supposed to be confidential, the California-based website [China Digital Times \(CDT\)](#) has become adept at obtaining leaked copies and publishing them in both Chinese and English. It is difficult to verify the orders' authenticity beyond the efforts of CDT staff, but the leaked documents often match visible shifts in coverage and are generally treated as credible by observers of Chinese media.

Freedom House analyzed all 75 leaked directives published by CDT in 2015 that ordered "negative" actions such to delete an article, not send reporters, exclude a topic from website homepages, or close the relevant comment sections. Many directives also ordered some positive action, like relying on "standard," "authoritative" sources of information, or adhering to coverage by the official Xinhua News Agency.

The sample is not exhaustive and may only be the tip of the iceberg; one leaked order from the CCP's Central Propaganda Department in September was listed as number [320](#) for the year. Nevertheless, an examination of the available directives can provide insight into the party's sensitivity to various types of content and which topics leaders deem most perilous to their hold on power.

The most commonly targeted categories of emerging news in 2015 were as follows:

1. Health and safety: Over one quarter of the analyzed directives (21 of 75) restricted coverage of man-made accidents, violent attacks, environmental pollution, or food safety. "Do not place news of the Zhangzhou, Fujian PX explosion in lead story sections of news agency websites," reads one such [order](#) from April, for example, censoring news about a blast at a factory that produces paraxylene (PX), a chemical whose facilities have spurred numerous protests in recent years. Five instructions specifically aimed to limit circulation and discus-



Firemen fight flames after an explosion at a petrochemical plant in Zhangzhou, Fujian province in April 2015. Censors ordered news websites to downplay the story, one of 21 censorship directives related to health and safety issued by Chinese authorities during the year. Credit: [Caixin](#)

sion of the air pollution documentary *Under the Dome*, which went [massively viral](#) in early 2015 before being abruptly [censored](#).

2. Economics: The second-largest group (11 of 75) restricted coverage of the Chinese economy, the stock market, or draft legislation related to economic policy. [One](#) such directive requires deletion of an article, “Why Hasn’t There Been an Inquiry into Rare Stock Market Crashes?” initially published on the blocked, U.S.-based dissident website Boxun but then circulated within Chinese cyberspace.

3. Official wrongdoing: A total of 10 directives restricted coverage involving official wrongdoing, ranging from news of officials’ overseas assets, to police abuses, to deaths connected to corruption investigations. Two of the deaths pointed an unwelcome spotlight on an unsavory side of Xi’s aggressive anti-corruption campaign—a convicted ally of former Chongqing party secretary Bo Xilai died in custody and a whistleblower was beaten to death by unidentified masked men.

4. Media/censorship: Nine directives restricted discussion of official actions related to media or Internet controls, such as the detention of journalists, the blocking of online censorship circumvention tools, or new regulations requiring deletion of online music. As commercial news outlets known for their financial reporting coming under pressure in 2015, specific articles they published were singled out for deletion.

5. Party/official reputation: Eight directives restricted circulation of content or news that would undermine the positive image leaders sought to convey of individual officials or the party’s activities, including a large military parade held in September. Five of the directives aimed to limit circulation of disrespectful or humorous references to Chinese president Xi Jinping.

6. Civil society: Seven directives restricted coverage of civil society, including the detention of an anti-corruption activist and a summer crackdown on human rights lawyers that was part of an unprecedented assault on China’s “rights defense” movement during the year.

The remaining directives sought to control reporting on seemingly innocuous official activity, foreign affairs, Hong Kong, and Tibet.

In 2014, Freedom House conducted a similar [analysis](#) of 318 censorship and propaganda directives published between November 2012 and May 2014. Although the samples are not all-inclusive, a comparison of the most censored topics from that period and from 2015 suggests a number of possible changes in CCP priorities.

Topic	Direction of change	Ranking
Health and safety	↑	#3 → #1
Economics	↑	#7 → #2
Official wrongdoing	↓	#1 → #3

Media/censorship	↑	#6 → #4
Civil society	↓	#4 → #6
Foreign affairs	↓	#5 → #8

It is impossible to explain conclusively the causes of these shifts. However, they appear to reflect both the increased political sensitivity of certain topics, such as the state of the Chinese economy during a slowdown, and the absence of other forces such as web users and journalists exposing official wrongdoing—and therefore needing to be censored—in an era of tightened media and Internet controls,

Yet in 2016, Chinese citizens' need for timely, accurate information about the very topics targeted for censorship in these directives—environmental pollution, excessive police force, the economy, and others—is not going to decrease. The country's journalists, netizens, technologists, and the international community will need to find new, creative ways to produce and disseminate news in what is increasingly looking like the most restrictive period for Chinese media in over a decade.

PRINT/NEW MEDIA

Valuable journalism fades as state-funded digital media grow

The year 2015 may have marked the end of an era in Chinese journalism. Until recently, liberal, commercial print media engaged in aggressive and influential reporting that also formed part of a successful business model. The decline is due to a combination of tighter government controls, targeted prosecutions, and the kinds of financial pressures facing print media worldwide.

Although investigative journalists and commercial media have faced periodic reprisals for over a decade, and more pressure than usual since 2012, events in 2015 were decisive in reducing the space and influence these media outlets had tried to carve out for themselves in a politically restrictive and highly competitive market.

The Guangdong-based Southern Media Group has been hit especially hard. Last [January](#), former *Southern Weekly* journalist Fang Kecheng lamented the failure of [2013 protests](#) by reporters and others who sought to combat censorship at the paper, one of the country's most influential liberal news outlets and a pioneer of serious investigative journalism in China. Fang said censorship demands had mounted since the protests, and an exodus of experienced journalists to various internet start-ups ensued.

In [April](#), authorities revoked the publishing permit for *Money Week* and shut down the website of the *21st Century Business Herald*. Staffers from the two Southern Media Group outlets had been detained in 2014 under allegations of extortion. In [August](#), Guangdong authorities published a report listing various new requirements that had been imposed on the company, including an increase in the percentage of CCP members among its employees.

In [September](#), three of the group's papers ran glowing coverage of a military parade held in Beijing, one of the CCP's largest propaganda events of the year.

The final blow of 2015 came on Christmas Eve, when [Shen Hao](#), the former chairman of the company's 21st Century Media unit and a former *Southern Weekly* editor whose [idealism and professionalism](#) inspired a generation of journalism students, was sentenced to four years in prison on extortion charges that many colleagues believe to be fabricated. Amid the Southern Media Group's political tribulations and falling readership, what was once among the most successful commercial media companies in China has reportedly been forced to accept [millions of dollars](#) in government subsidies. "The case of the 21st Century group showed that journalism has been annihilated in China," [Cheng Yizhong](#), a prominent journalist who has served time in prison for his reporting, told the *Washington Post*. "The ruling party has won the war it started in 2003, completely."

Similar pressures have appeared at other commercial media outlets over the last two years, causing many to break up [investigative reporting teams](#) and even close down altogether. In a watershed moment in 2015, [Wang Xiaolu](#), a reporter from *Caijing*, one of the country's most respected financial magazines, was arrested and paraded on state television in August for an article that reported on the stock market around the time of one of the summer's precipitous sell-offs. Wang's case was widely seen as an attempt to scapegoat and intimidate financial reporters as the government attempted to prop up the market.

Adding to the shifting direction of news coverage in China, a number of new, state-subsidized digital media outlets are gaining readers and increasing the dominance of official narratives. The most prominent is the [Paper](#), a web-based publication entirely funded by the government under the Shanghai United Media Group. As Tabitha Speelman outlined in a recent [article](#), the Paper is China's first digital news organization to create a mobile application featuring its own content, which consists of an incongruous combination of social exposés that occasionally get censored, propaganda-like pieces, and arts and culture news. With this recipe, the *Paper* "has distinguished itself by successfully integrating into the media diet of many young Chinese, most of whom would normally not follow or share state media's often stodgy coverage." Its success has reportedly prompted satisfied reactions from the State Internet Information Office and copycat online platforms in at least six other provinces or municipalities.

Taken together, these developments paint a disheartening picture for China watchers who saw publications like those at the Southern Media Group as proof that quality journalism could survive—and even thrive—in one of the world's the most restrictive political environments.

A few journalistic stalwarts, like Hu Shuli's *Caixin*, carry on. But with the regime's thumb on the scale, the model of journalism that produced hard-hitting, popular investigative reporting on topics like official corruption and tainted vaccines is increasingly losing out to a format whose most prominent feature is sunny headlines about government work and the daily activities of Xi Jinping.

PRINT / NEW MEDIA

Jailed journalists, televised confessions reach new high

On December 1, the Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ) published its annual [census](#) of imprisoned journalists. For the second year in a row, China topped the list as the country with the largest number behind bars. Its national total of [49](#) individuals is a record high since CPJ began tracking the statistic, though still likely only a fraction of the total number of Chinese citizens imprisoned for exercising their right to free expression. Of the 49 journalists, 25 were detained in 2014 and four in 2015. One person who narrowly avoided inclusion on the CPJ list was Gao Yu, a 71-year-old veteran journalist sentenced in April to seven years in prison, but released in [November](#) to serve a reduced five-year sentence at home or in hospital care.

A Freedom House analysis of the 49 cases offers additional insight on recent trends:

- **Gender:** 47 male, 2 female
- **Ethnicity:** 29 Han Chinese, 20 ethnic minorities (Uighur, Tibetan, and Yi). This represented a shift from several years ago, when an even larger percentage were ethnic minorities.
- **Medium:** 13 print, 1 broadcast, 35 web. This reflects the shift to digital media, as well as the Communist Party's generally tighter grip on broadcast versus print media, which makes it less likely that a broadcast journalist would need to be punished.
- **Profession:** 18 professional journalists, 28 writers, publishers, or citizen journalists. This breakdown represents a shift from the pre-Xi Jinping era, when the likelihood of professional journalists facing prison was quite low. It also includes four journalists or publishers from Hong Kong. Of the 18 professional journalists, 14 were jailed on apparently trumped-up charges of financial mismanagement, corruption, or illegal business activity.
- **Average sentence length:** 9 years, not including 3 sentences of life imprisonment, and 20 individuals whose sentences have yet to be announced. The sentences for Han Chinese professional journalists tend to be shorter than those for prodemocracy writers or ethnic minority reporters.
- **Televised confessions:** 10 documented confessions by journalists detained since January 2014 (including Gao Yu and another reporter since released from custody and therefore excluded from CPJ's latest count), compared with 0 among those imprisoned earlier. The phenomenon of televised confessions, now relatively common, was virtually nonexistent before Xi Jinping took power.

In addition to the cases above, the year 2015 was notable for the detention of a large number of [human rights lawyers](#) and other legal professionals, many of whom frequently used social media services like Sina Weibo or Tencent's WeChat to share details of cases or comment on government policies. On December 22, a Beijing court sentenced prominent free expression attorney [Pu Zhiqiang](#) to a three-year suspended sentence over seven microblog posts in which he mocked government officials and criticized harsh policies in Xinjiang. He was released

from custody after 19 months in detention, thin and in poor health, and forbidden from practicing law again. Foreign journalists and diplomats who attempted to attend his December 14 trial were harassed and denied access; hundreds of Chinese citizens also gathered to support Pu, and at least [18 were arrested](#), with several still in custody at year's end.

PRINT / NEW MEDIA

New legal provisions codify party's primacy, increase penalties for dissent

During 2015, the National People's Congress adopted several laws or amendments that codified existing media controls, increased penalties for certain forms of expression, and require technology firms to assist security agencies with investigations. Two laws—a [National Security Law](#) adopted in July and an [Antiterrorism Law](#) passed in December—drew criticism and expressions of concern from a wide array of foreign governments, business representatives, legal experts, and human rights groups. A series of amendments to the Criminal Law that came into effect in November received less attention but included several worrisome provisions.

The laws often conflate protection of the Chinese Communist Party's political dominance with the idea of security for the nation or internationally recognized aims like preventing terrorism, protecting user privacy, and defending China's territorial integrity. Importantly, the [National Security Law](#) prioritizes maintaining “the leadership of the CCP” and “the socialist system with Chinese characteristics” over other state security concerns in an unusually explicit manner, listing it first in several places. The new legal provisions also employ vague language and broad definitions, raising fears that security forces will use them to punish peaceful political or religious speech.

Several dimensions of the laws have raised particular concerns over their potentially negative impact on free expression:

- A call to “strengthen guidance on news, propaganda, and public opinion about national security,” with the latter defined broadly to include economics, cultural expression, and religion (National Security Law)
- A call for all key network infrastructure and information systems to be “secure and controllable” (National Security Law)
- A ban preventing journalists and individual social media users from reporting on terrorist attacks and authorities' response, including by using sources other than pre-approved official accounts ([Antiterrorism Law](#))
- A requirement that technology firms provide authorities with technical information and help with decryption when security agencies demand it for the investigation of terrorism cases (Antiterrorism Law)
- Penalties of up to five years in prison for promoting terrorism or “extremism” by

producing or distributing print, audio, or video materials ([Criminal Law amendment](#))

- Penalties of up to seven years in prison for spreading “rumors” on the internet by publishing false information that threatens public security (Criminal Law amendment)
- Penalties of up to life in prison (an increase from 15 years) for using a “heretical organization to undermine implementation of the law,” a charge often invoked to jail underground Christians and Falun Gong adherents, not only for religious activities but also for disseminating unapproved religious texts, critiques of CCP policies, and details of human rights abuses ([Criminal Law amendment](#))
- Penalties of up to three years in prison for failure by network service providers to perform duties (including monitoring, censorship, or protection of user data) that results in severe consequences (Criminal Law amendment)

Taken together, these legal measures do not represent a sea change in the CCP’s desire to control the information landscape, but they do empower the security apparatus and place more legal tools in the hands of those who would abuse state authority to suppress dissent. They also provide insight into the wide array of economic, political, technological, and military threats the CCP perceives itself to be facing. Their ultimate impact will depend on implementation—something to watch in the coming year.

NEW MEDIA

Top stories on the Chinese internet in 2015

As the year 2015 drew to a close, the [New York Times](#) published a list of the top 10 news stories that most captured Chinese internet users’ attention, according to queries on Baidu, the country’s leading search engine. Other Chinese and foreign news organizations and websites released their own lists of the biggest stories, including the most censored. Some paralleled Baidu’s list, as popular stories often generated snarky netizen comments or damning unofficial photos, attracting the notice of censors.

Freedom House has compiled the following list, drawing on those published elsewhere, but also with an emphasis on important stories that might have had a greater impact on a less heavily censored Chinese internet.

1. **Military parade:** The September 3 military parade in Beijing, which commemorated the 70th anniversary of the end of World War II in Asia, was the news event that users looked up the most on Baidu’s search engine. It was also the most vigorously censored topic on the Sina Weibo microblogging platform. Six out of the top 20 most rapidly censored popular posts related to the parade, according to data Freedom House obtained from Hong Kong University’s Weiboscope. These included the top-ranked item, which compared Xi Jinping riding in an open car to [Winnie the Pooh](#), and several others in which humorous verbal exchanges were added to photos of Xi with Russian president Vladimir Putin.
1. **Tianjin explosions:** A series of chemical explosions rocked Tianjin in August, causing over

170 deaths. It was the second most searched event, according to Baidu. Despite official efforts to control news coverage, online and traditional media outlets [pushed back](#) and sought answers to questions about accountability and corruption surrounding the fatal accident, in an increasingly rare instance of rebellious journalism. The explosion was the topic of the [second](#) most censored Weibo post of the year. And the most popular post of 2015 on the California-based [China Digital Times](#) was a photo essay by a *Beijing Daily* journalist who managed to report from the scene of the disaster despite authorities' efforts to ban such coverage.

2. **End of the one-child policy:** In October the Communist Party announced the final removal of the decades-old one-child limit, permitting all Chinese families to have two children. The change pushed this topic to the number 3 spot on Baidu's list.
3. **Uniqlo sex video:** A mobile-phone video in which a couple recorded themselves having sex in the fitting room of a Uniqlo clothing store in Beijing spread like wildfire and ranked number 4 on Baidu's list. Several people were later detained in relation to the incident, although censors did not appear to clamp down on the arguably pornographic content as quickly as they tend to on information deemed politically threatening.
4. **Mao mockery:** A video of Bi Fujian, a television celebrity, at a private event singing a Cultural Revolution-era song with mocking side comments about Mao Zedong appeared online and made the number 5 spot on Baidu's list. Censors [ordered](#) the deletion of the video—and of a “patriotic” article urging Bi to apologize—but apparently the recording and netizen interest in it continued to spread.
5. **The stock-market plunge:** A series of stock-market drops over the summer led to trillions of dollars in losses and a global stock sell-off. [Associated Press](#) business editors named China's economic slowdown the top business story of the year worldwide. Given the story's important political and economic ramifications, it is surprising that it did not rank higher on Baidu's list. The limited attention by users (or possible downplaying of the issue by Baidu) could be due in part to a Communist Party directive to strengthen positive “[economic propaganda](#),” an order that itself was the 10th most popular post on China Digital Times for the year.
6. **'Under the Dome':** This environmental [documentary](#) by former journalist Chai Jing was first posted online on February 28 and quickly garnered hundreds of millions of views. Over the following week, censorship authorities issued increasingly restrictive instructions to curb its spread, finally ordering its deletion from all video streaming sites on [March 6](#). A so-called “airpocalypse” of especially harmful smog hit northern China in December, and in the absence of censorship, Chai's film would likely have been watched by even more Chinese internet users in 2015—and perhaps included on Baidu's list.
7. **Ou Shaokun:** This 61-year-old anticorruption activist gained an online following by exposing officials' improper personal use of government vehicles. In [March](#), just hours after posting photos of local government cars being misused on his popular microblog account, Ou was detained in Hunan and held for five days on allegations of soliciting a prostitute. After his release, Ou claimed that he had been set up by a businessman with ties to local officials. Netizens and Ou persisted in investigating who might have been behind the attempt to discredit him, prompting new rounds of [censorship](#). Three cen-

sorship directives were issued in 2015 in connection with his story, and a screenshot of an interview with him was the [fourth](#) most rapidly censored Weibo post. The topic does not appear on Baidu's list.

BEYOND CHINA

'Cyber sovereignty,' Great Cannon, unexpected concessions

Last month's [China Media Bulletin](#) highlighted the recent evolution of long-standing methods for insinuating Communist Party influence into foreign media, the film industry, and international cultural events, including through visa denials and financing by pro-Beijing businessmen. For this annual summary, three other trends related to the intersection between the international community and Chinese information controls deserve notice:

- **Promoting 'cyber sovereignty':** This term first emerged at the inaugural World Internet Conference hosted in China in 2014. Throughout 2015, it was established as a core component of official Chinese jargon on internet governance policy. The concept most recently appeared in a December [speech by Xi Jinping](#) at the second World Internet Conference, hosted in Wuzhen. "Cyber sovereignty" refers to the idea that governments have a right to manage their domestic internet—and to police the content and traffic that flows across their borders—as they see fit, disregarding existing international norms of free expression and free-trade commitments. [Free speech advocates](#) worry that the prominence of the concept at the summit, which was attended by leaders of Central Asian countries and global technology firms, represents a renewed effort to gain international support for Beijing's approach and for a state-led internet governance model more generally.
- **Deploying the 'Great Cannon':** This term was coined by [Canadian researchers](#) to describe a cyberattack capacity that they discovered while analyzing a massive denial-of-service attack against the programmer database GitHub. There have long been examples of DDoS attacks targeting foreign-hosted websites that the Chinese government frowns upon for various reasons. But the "Great Cannon" attack was the first known instance of transnational traffic being hijacked at China's international gateway and redirected for that purpose, as well as one of the most conclusive examples of Chinese government involvement in such attacks.
- **Conceding to international pressure:** Despite an atmosphere of tight political controls, new arrests, and outward blustering, Chinese leaders made more concessions to international and domestic pressure on media and internet freedom issues in 2015 than in recent memory. Prominent journalist Gao Yu, five women's rights activists, and attorney Pu Zhiqiang were all released from custody, though their freedom remains constrained and they never should have been detained in the first place. While French journalist Ursula Gauthier was expelled after writing about Xinjiang, *New York Times* journalist Chris Buckley was permitted to return to Beijing after having been forced to leave China in 2012. And although problematic provisions remain in the new antiterrorism law, proposed requirements that foreign technology companies store all data of Chinese users inside China were dropped from the final version. Such examples highlight the constant calibration that occurs as Chinese leaders weigh the costs and benefits of specific actions within their overarching policy of controlling information flows. They also suggest that in 2016, international actors

should continue to use multilateral pressure to influence the individual cases of political detainees (such as human rights lawyers Wang Yu and Wang Quanzhang, and journalist Shen Hao), as well as problematic draft legislation like the Foreign NGO Management Law.

WHAT TO WATCH FOR IN 2016

- **More economic censorship and propaganda:** As China's economy is expected to continue slowing this year, watch for more examples of previously tolerated news on the financial system and stock market becoming politically sensitive. This increased censorship will likely be supplemented with vigorous efforts by state media and propaganda authorities to put a positive spin on emerging problems and government responses.
- **Verdicts for detained journalists and lawyers:** Watch for news of trials and verdicts for the 20 detained journalists and netizens on CPJ's list whose sentences are unknown or pending. Several dozen lawyers detained in 2015 on charges related to free expression will also likely be tried, and possibly sentenced to prison, this year.
- **Implementation of recent legislation, passage of more:** Watch for use of restrictive and vague provisions in new antiterrorism and criminal laws to punish Chinese citizens for peaceful religious or political expression. Also watch for passage—or quiet demise due to international pressure—of two other pending laws that have worried civil society advocates, foreign governments, universities, and the business sector because of their potentially negative impact on academic, media, and internet freedom: a [cybersecurity law](#) and a [foreign NGO management law](#).
- **'Social credit system' plan:** On several occasions in 2015, news and commentary emerged about a Chinese government plan to establish a "social credit system" within five years; the idea first surfaced in a [2014 State Council Notice](#). The system would be based on the kinds of financial credit systems common around the world, but would also incorporate data about [where people go, what they buy, and what they post online](#) to rate and try to improve behavior based on government-dictated criteria. Opponents fear that the system will exploit personal information collected by commercial entities and state bodies to create a comprehensive incentive system, discouraging dissent and punishing critics. Watch for any details about [blueprints](#) for this nationwide database.

For more information

- For archives, go to: www.freedomhouse.org/china_media
- For additional information on human rights and free expression in China, see: *Freedom in the World 2015*, *Freedom of the Press 2015*, *Freedom on the Net 2014*



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

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