

CHINA MEDIA BULLETIN

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IMAGE OF THE MONTH

Deleted delegate faces

This screenshot is taken from a March 2 Twitter post by @AirMovingDevice, an account that used facial recognition algorithms to identify delegates to the annual plenary sessions of China's main legislative and advisory bodies, among other such projects. In the same thread, the account stated, "I do like the idea of turning the tables and using surveillance/facial recognition tech rather than having the tech used on me." Although the account had only about 3,000 followers, its research was widely shared among China watchers and foreign journalists. Four days after these posts, under apparent police pressure, the account announced that it would be deleting all of its tweets and ceasing its activity, ominously adding, "It is not my intention to subvert state or Party authority."

Credit: [China Digital Times](http://chinadigitaltimes.com)



ANALYSIS

Worried about Huawei? Take a closer look at Tencent

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The Chinese social media giant is a growing global force, and it does the bidding of the Communist Party.

It has long been understood that Tencent—the Chinese company that owns WeChat and QQ, two of the world’s most widely used social media applications—facilitates Chinese government censorship and surveillance. But over the past year, the scale and significance of this activity have increased and become more visible, both inside and outside China.

During the last month alone, several events have illustrated the trend and Tencent’s close relationship with the Chinese authorities.

On March 2, Dutch hacker [Victor Gevers](#) revealed that the content of millions of conversations on Tencent applications among users at internet cafés are being relayed, along with the users’ identities, to police stations across China. Just three days later, the company’s founder and chief executive, [Pony Ma](#), took his seat among 3,000 delegates to the National People’s Congress, the country’s rubber-stamp parliament. Ma reportedly raised the issue of [data privacy](#) even as security agencies were using data from his company’s applications to root out unauthorized religious activity.

On March 16, China watcher [Chenchen Zhang](#) shared an anecdote on Twitter about a member of the Uighur Muslim minority who was stopped at mainland China’s border with Hong Kong and interrogated for three days simply because someone on his WeChat contact list had recently “checked in” with a location setting of Mecca, Saudi Arabia. The authorities apparently feared that the Uighur man had traveled on pilgrimage to Mecca without permission, warning that such a move could yield 15 years in prison.

As Tencent’s pattern of censorship and data sharing with China’s repressive government continues and intensifies, now is the time to consider actions that might help protect the basic rights of all users, regardless of their location and nationality.

Tencent’s role in China

Founded in 1998, Tencent and its popular applications have quickly emerged as ubiquitous elements of China’s communications, financial, and social fabric. In [January](#), the company declared that WeChat alone had a billion active daily users.

While the company has been forced since its inception to comply with strict Chinese Communist Party information controls, the combination of growing government demands and WeChat’s near market saturation in China has increased the scope and impact of its complicity.

In the realm of censorship, media reports and expert research indicate that WeChat has been refining the use of [artificial intelligence](#) to identify and delete images, which

netizens commonly employ to evade censorship and surveillance of text-based communications. The platform has also shuttered thousands of independently operated [social media accounts](#) that produced unauthorized news and analysis. These and other forms of censorship significantly distort the information received by Chinese users on vital topics. Analysis by researchers at Hong Kong University's WeChatscope project, which tracks deletions from some 4,000 public accounts on the platform, found that among the [most censored topics in 2018](#) were major news stories like the US-China trade dispute, the arrest in Canada of Huawei chief financial officer Meng Wanzhou, the #MeToo movement, and public health scandals.

Monitoring of user activity on the platform has been made simpler by enhanced enforcement of real-name registration requirements for mobile phones, the electronic payment features of WeChat, large-scale police purchases of [smartphone scanners](#), and [new rules](#) facilitating public security agencies' access to data centers. As indicated above, content from Tencent applications is being directly "spoon-fed" to police in some cases.

This surveillance is increasingly leading to legal repercussions for ordinary users. A sample of cases tracked in Freedom House's [China Media Bulletin](#) over the past year feature penalties against numerous WeChat users for [mocking President Xi Jinping](#), criticizing [judicial officials](#), commenting on [massive floods](#), sharing information about [human rights abuses](#), or expressing views related to their persecuted religion or ethnicity, be they [Uighur Muslims](#), [Tibetan Buddhists](#), or [Falun Gong](#) practitioners. The punishments have ranged from several days of administrative detention to many years in prison, in some cases for comments that were ostensibly shared privately with friends. These dynamics have inevitably encouraged [self-censorship](#) on the platform.

Global expansion

Although WeChat's primary user base is in China, an estimated [100 to 200 million](#) people outside the country use the messaging service. Among them are millions of members of the Chinese diaspora in countries like Canada, Australia, and the United States, but there is also broader expansion in much of Asia. [Malaysia](#) is reportedly home to 20 million users, out of a population of 31 million. In [Thailand](#), an estimated 17 percent of the population has a WeChat account. In [Mongolia](#), WeChat was the second most downloaded application in 2017. Merchants in [Myanmar](#)'s Shan State along the border with China have taken up the app, and the number of retailers in [Japan](#) that accept WePay (mostly when serving Chinese tourists) increased 35-fold last year.

Tencent recently purchased a \$150 million stake in the popular news aggregator [Reddit](#) and is eyeing an entrance into the online video market in Taiwan, according to [Taiwanese officials](#).

Evidence that politicized censorship and surveillance may affect Tencent users outside China has begun to emerge. A 2016 study by [Citizen Lab](#) found that conversations between an overseas user and a contact inside China were subject to certain forms of keyword censorship, and that once an account is registered with a Chinese phone number, it remains subject to mainland controls even outside the country.

In [Australia](#), a more recent study of news sources available to the Chinese diaspora found negligible political coverage of China on the WeChat channels of Chinese-language news providers. Incredibly, between March and August 2017, none of the WeChat channels published a single article on Chinese politics, despite the run-up to the important 19th Party Congress that fall. In [Canada](#), WeChat censors have deleted a member of Parliament's message to constituents praising Hong Kong's Umbrella Movement protesters, manipulated dissemination of news reports related to [Meng Wanzhou's arrest](#), and blocked broader [media coverage](#) of Chinese government corruption and leading officials.

Amid a massive crackdown in [Xinjiang](#), Chinese police have also harnessed WeChat to connect with overseas Uighurs, demand personal information or details about activists, and insert state monitors into private groups.

How to respond

Regardless of whether Tencent is a reluctant or an eager accomplice to the Chinese government's repressive policies, the reality is that Tencent employees can be expected to censor, monitor, and report private communications and personal data, in many cases leading to innocent people's arrest and torture.

This should be the starting point for anyone considering using, regulating, or investing in the company's services.

For those inside China, it is nearly impossible today to function without using WeChat to some extent. But they would be well advised to exercise caution, restricting the application to its most practical functions and consulting available guides on enhancing digital security and accessing information on current affairs more safely. ([Freedom House](#) published a set of such resources last year.)

Users outside China, particularly those without family or friends on the mainland, should rethink whether WeChat is really essential to their daily lives. Individuals who do communicate with personal contacts in China can help protect them by directing them to more secure applications if a sensitive topic comes up, or using homonyms to replace potentially problematic terms, as some journalists have reported doing. Users in the Chinese diaspora should explore ways of expanding their sources of news and information beyond what is available on WeChat.

As governments around the world try to tackle problems related to "fake news," political manipulation, and weak data protections on social media platforms like Facebook and Twitter, Chinese counterparts like WeChat should be subject to at least as much scrutiny and regulation—and be held accountable for any violations. Governments and corporations should also restrict usage of WeChat among their employees, particularly those who work with sensitive information, as the governments of Australia and India have recently done. Politicians communicating with their Chinese-speaking constituents should make sure to do so across a diversity of platforms, not just those that are subject to Chinese government control.

International civil society groups can assist both users and democratic governments by maintaining up-to-date digital security guides available in Chinese, documenting the extent to which content outside China is censored or monitored on WeChat, and exploring legal recourse for those whose rights may have been violated by Tencent's practices.

Lastly, investors in Tencent should seriously consider the moral and political implications of their support for the firm. Anyone concerned about human rights, electoral interference by foreign powers, or privacy violations by tech giants should divest from the company, including retirement funds. Socially responsible investment plans should exclude Tencent from their portfolios if they have not already. Even from a purely financial perspective, Tencent shares may not be a wise purchase. The stock's price has dropped 19 percent over the past year, at least in part because of tighter government controls on user communications. Given that Chinese regulators are now turning their attention to the gaming industry, the company's most profitable area of activity, its value is likely to dip further. As stock analyst Leo Sun has [warned](#), "investors in Chinese tech companies should never underestimate the government's ability to throttle their growth."

No amount of pushback from users, democratic governments, civil society groups, or investors is likely to change Tencent's complicity with the Chinese government's repressive activities. Its very survival depends on dutiful adherence to Communist Party directives. But the steps suggested above would do a great deal to limit the current and potential future damage caused by the company's practices—for individual users, for the world's open societies, and for the very concept of free expression in the digital age.

IN THE NEWS

Tighter information controls and flailing foreign propaganda greet congress, advisory sessions

This year's "two sessions" of the National People's Congress (NPC) and the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference (CCPCC), held March 5–15, arrived as President Xi Jinping and the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) were under unusual pressure due to a [slowing economy](#), a continuing [trade war](#) with Washington, and mounting [international criticism](#) of the human rights [crisis](#) in Xinjiang. Beijing responded by tightening controls on speech and information and kicking its external propaganda machine into overdrive.

- **Tightened information controls:** As is often the case preceding high-profile political meetings, authorities sought to preempt any independent commentary or protests by compelling Beijing-based human rights activists to [travel](#) outside the capital. Activist Hu Jia was among those escorted out of town for a forced holiday, as he [has been](#) in years past. Poet Hua Yong, who had previously been detained after criticizing the party online, [shared a poem](#) on Twitter on February 27, bidding his friends and home city goodbye as "they hold their meeting." Beijing residents reported increased security measures throughout the city, including additional bag checks at transit hubs. Internet restrictions also [tightened](#) in early March, an apparent attempt to [further control](#) the news narrative surrounding the meetings. Compa-

nies running virtual private network (VPN) services noticed an increase in blocking efforts beginning on March 2, and one VPN staffer noted that the authorities appeared “to be using a combination of automation, likely artificial intelligence, and focused human monitoring” to block the tools that enable users to bypass website filtering. Meanwhile, a Twitter account that used artificial intelligence to analyze public information about Chinese officials deleted all of its content on [March 6](#), apparently under police pressure, in keeping with a recent [crackdown](#) on critical Twitter users based in China, where Twitter is blocked. The account in question, @AirMovingDevice, focused in part on top officials’ plagiarism in their graduate degree theses, and it had more recently used facial recognition technology on [NPC delegates](#) ahead of this year’s two sessions. Some of the account’s previous tweets are [archived](#) at *China Digital Times*.

- **Foreign propaganda:** Beijing’s English-language propaganda apparatus generated some laughable content in preparation for the two sessions, summed up by the China Media Project’s [David Bandurski](#) as “the inevitable outcome of a propaganda system that is cash-rich and culturally and intellectually bankrupt.” The official news agency Xinhua on March 3 posted a nationalistic English-language [rap video](#) celebrating China’s recent achievements. The video’s sometimes nonsensical lyrics, and the fact that it came amid official restrictions on [hip-hop culture](#), earned the video an [overwhelmingly negative review](#) from the international English-language press. Xinhua offered two other videos that were likely just as ineffective: One attempted Web 2.0–style news coverage, with two foreign “Xinhua correspondents” [answering questions](#) about the two sessions; the other had an American presenter [extol](#) the virtues of “Chinese democracy,” which “results in political stability and vitality” and is, supposedly, on full display at the two sessions. Other examples of state propaganda about the meetings may have been more successful. China Global Television Network (CGTN), the English-language channel of state broadcaster China Central Television (CCTV), featured a “[Who Runs China](#)” interactive webpage that attempted to portray the legislative assembly as highly diverse and representative. The Global Times newspaper ran an [article](#) on March 15, the closing day of the sessions, that highlighted a large assembly of journalists from partner countries of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI)—China’s controversial program of infrastructural investment—who contributed to [positive coverage](#) of the sessions and the BRI in their home publications.

Tech policy at the two sessions

- **Foreign investment law:** On March 15, the National People’s Congress (NPC) voted almost unanimously (2,929 to 8) to approve a [law](#) on foreign investment that will go into effect on January 1, 2020. The law was rushed through the rubber-stamp legislature on the last day of its annual plenary session—held in parallel with that of the advisory Chinese People’s Political Consultative Conference (CCPCC)—in what was read by analysts as an attempt to [address concerns](#) from foreign investors and governments about unfair market access, forced technology transfers, and

the theft of commercial secrets from foreign businesses operating in China. Ahead of the law's adoption, a March 7 post at [Lawfare](#) noted that the vague provisions in the draft fell far short of meeting the demands of the United States regarding technology transfers and investment restrictions, characterizing it as a “modest step in the direction of making China’s investment climate more appealing to and equitable for foreign investors.” The post noted that even with the law in place, the Chinese Communist Party’s unchecked power could still put foreign firms at a huge disadvantage and leave them exposed to security risks. While the new law does state that the government is [not allowed](#) to force foreign investors to transfer their technology, the imprecise language and lack of details in the adopted legislation is [unlikely to satisfy](#) foreign companies and US trade negotiators.

- **Artificial intelligence priority highlighted:** For the [third year](#) in a row, Premier Li Keqiang mentioned the development of the artificial intelligence (AI) industry in his work report at the opening of the two sessions on March 5. Li [urged](#) China to hasten the development of big data and AI technology in its efforts to build “smart cities.” One thing that Li conspicuously did [not mention](#) in his report was the government’s “Made in China 2025” industrial plan, which has been a key focus of [concerns](#) in Washington and the European Union. Throughout the annual meetings, it was made clear that AI development was [high](#) on the government agenda. The March 5 unveiling of the state budget showed that, despite slow economic growth, funds for science and technology would expand 13.4 percent compared with 2018. On the sidelines of the meetings, the official news agency Xinhua [debuted](#) its AI “anchorwoman,” which helped to cover the NPC session. The new artificial presenter, dubbed “Xin Xiaomeng,” is an upgraded version of “Xin Xiaohao,” a virtual male anchor that made its [debut](#) at the World Internet Conference in November.
- **Tech entrepreneur participation:** Technology entrepreneurs have played an increasingly prominent role in the two sessions from year to year, suggesting a closer relationship between their companies and the authorities. Several founders and chief executives of Chinese tech firms are NPC delegates, including Tencent’s Pony Ma, Xiaomi’s Lei Jun, and Gree’s Dong Mingzhu. Others, like Baidu’s Robin Li and Sogou’s Wang Xiaochun, are members of the CPPCC. These businesspeople added their voices to the discussion [about AI](#), calling for further research, collaboration, and the industrialization of AI technology. As noted by [TechNode](#) and [SupChina](#), the “internet of things,” 5G mobile technology, cybersecurity, and data protection were among the other topics mentioned by the participating tech executives.

Surveillance updates: Data leaks, gait recognition, expansion in Tibet

- **Data leaks show extent of surveillance, vulnerability of stockpiled information:** Recent data leaks uncovered by a Dutch researcher shed light on the extent of Chinese surveillance programs, as well as the lack of data protection measures at some leading Chinese technology firms. On February 13, ethical hacker and security

researcher Victor Gevers (@0xDUDE) found an exposed database belonging to Shenzhen-based SenseNets, a company specializing in artificial intelligence (AI) crowd analysis and facial recognition technology. The database, which [Gevers claimed](#) was “[fully accessible to anyone](#),” contained [information on 2.6 million people in Xinjiang](#)—including their official identification numbers, birthdays, addresses, ethnicities, employers, and perhaps most chillingly, a list of their [GPS locations](#) over the past 24 hours. The database had been open since July, but it was locked by the company after Gevers reported the leak. A long-running crackdown in Xinjiang has led to the detention of an estimated [one million](#) or more ethnic Uighurs and other Turkic Muslims in a network of internment camps. As a result of the campaign, Xinjiang has become a “[laboratory](#)” for testing cutting-edge surveillance technology that in some cases has spread to other parts of China or been [exported abroad](#). On March 6, Gevers [revealed](#) on Twitter that the Microsoft platforms Github and Azure were being used in the SenseNets program. That, along with a SenseNets website that listed Microsoft as a partner, sparked [speculation](#) on whether Microsoft was knowingly or unknowingly allowing its services to be used for Xinjiang surveillance. Microsoft has since [denied](#) having a partnership with the Chinese firm. Separately, Gevers on March 2 [reported](#) that he had uncovered a similarly unprotected Chinese collection of over 300 million private social media messages that contained highly personal metadata. Later, on March 9, Gevers [revealed](#) a different cache of detailed personal information on over 1.8 million women in China, including a “[BreedReady](#)” column detailing their childbearing status.

- **Real-time gait recognition:** Last month, news outlets began [covering](#) recent software advances made by Chinese AI start-up Watrix, including a program that is able to identify a person by analyzing physical movement from real-time video images. The company claims that its accuracy rate is above 96 percent, and that the software can identify a person from as far as 50 meters away. Unlike facial recognition software, which an individual can thwart by simply covering or altering his or her face, Watrix claims that its system can distinguish a fake limp from a real one. Police are piloting the software in large cities including Beijing, Shanghai, and Chongqing, and the start-up is reportedly in contract talks with security companies from Singapore, India, Russia, the Netherlands, and the Czech Republic.
- **US DNA tech firm halts sales in Xinjiang:** As the human rights crisis in Xinjiang continues to garner international criticism, the US-based firm Thermo Fisher said on February 20 that it would [stop selling](#) DNA biodata collection equipment in Xinjiang. Meanwhile, Kenneth Kidd, a prominent Yale University geneticist who had been providing Chinese officials with genetic material that was used to compare Uighur and Han Chinese DNA, told the New York Times that he had been unaware of how the Chinese side had been using his material, and had been led to believe that he was simply collaborating on research in keeping with ethical norms.
- **Chinese tech firms racing to Tibet:** As Beijing attempts to further tighten its grip on Tibet in order to “maintain stability,” Chinese tech firms that specialize in AI and big data analysis are [elbowing their way](#) into the highly sensitive region. AI start-ups and tech giants like Alibaba, Tencent, and iFlyTek are establishing research and

venture-capital units in Lhasa, taking advantage of government subsidies meant to promote economic growth in the region and increase the sector's proximity to a population that Beijing seeks to control. News about the Tibetan tech rush came at an [especially sensitive](#) time in the region: March 10 marked the anniversary of the 1959 Tibetan unrest and crackdown that led to the Dalai Lama's flight to India, and March 14 was the anniversary of 2008 protests that sparked the [largest](#) crackdown in the Tibetan areas of China in decades.

HONG KONG

Pro-Beijing media outlets harass activists

In recent months, Beijing-controlled media outlets in Hong Kong have been “weaponized” to surveil and smear local activists in the semiautonomous region, once a haven for press freedom in East Asia. Staffers from outlets such as Ta Kung Pao and Wen Wei Po have begun to follow democracy and independence advocates, then run feature stories about the targeted individuals' supposed secret relationships or shady meetings. A February 26 [report](#) from the Globe and Mail describes the “paparazzi-style coverage” of activist Wayne Chan by the two Beijing-linked papers, which ran headlines presenting his lifestyle as indulgent and lacking in morals.

The two papers are also believed to be pursuing Hong Kong activists to Taiwan, as [evidenced](#) by detailed reports on several activists' movements on the island during a January trip. A Reuters examination published on March 15 found that at least 25 people linked to causes disliked by Beijing had been the subject of such harassment when visiting Taiwan over the past three years. Rights activists have argued that the newspapers' coverage should not be regarded as legitimate journalism, since it regularly involves intrusive surveillance and the publication of personal information about the targets and their families. Some Taiwanese officials concur, stating that the papers had committed “unlawful” acts, and that their journalists would be banned from traveling to Taiwan for several years if they do not provide “a reasonable explanation” for their activities. Similar tactics have been used on foreign critics of Beijing who visited Hong Kong, such as Australia-based American academic Kevin Caricco, as [noted](#) in the January 2019 issue of the China Media Bulletin.

BEYOND CHINA

Aggressive diplomats, Chinese printers, Reddit downvoting, propaganda in Taiwan

While Chinese Communist Party authorities keep a tight grip on the domestic media narrative through regular directives to editors and a sophisticated censorship apparatus that limits access to foreign news, Beijing also consistently seeks to influence external public opinion regarding China. This month, examples of its efforts included bullying by Chinese diplomats, domestic printers' censorship of foreign clients' orders,

and an apparent trolling campaign on Reddit.

- **Chinese diplomats get aggressive in Sweden, Russia:** On March 18, Reporters Without Borders [condemned](#) the Chinese embassy in Stockholm for its repeated harassment of Swedish journalists regarding their coverage of China. Chinese ambassador Gui Congyou and his staff had denounced several Swedish news outlets, most [recently](#) for publishing an op-ed by a Taiwanese representative advocating support for Taiwan’s democracy in the face of Beijing’s increasing aggression. Relations between Stockholm and Beijing have been strained since the extralegal 2015 cross-border abduction of Swedish citizen Gui Minhai, who was [again detained](#) in January 2018 while traveling with Swedish diplomats in China. Sweden [recalled](#) its former ambassador to China and launched an inquiry into her conduct after she reportedly arranged meetings between two mysterious businessmen and [Gui’s daughter](#) on January 24–25. The men pressed Gui’s daughter to remain silent about her father’s case. Meanwhile, on March 5, the Russian newspaper [Nezavisimaya Gazeta](#) published an editorial [criticizing](#) the Chinese embassy for threatening to blacklist a reporter over a February 28 article on China’s economy.
- **Chinese printers’ censorship affects foreign publishing:** Chinese printers have been [turning down books](#) that contain certain words or may be deemed sensitive in China, even when the books are intended for foreign sales and audiences. [Australian](#) and [New Zealand](#)-based publishers are being denied services by Chinese printers or having timeline delays if their works include mentions of particular Chinese political figures, maps, [political movements](#), [religious or geographic keywords](#), or Chinese [dissidents](#). The printing companies’ actions effectively make the production of such books more expensive by forcing publishers to print them elsewhere, influencing the global marketplace of ideas in Beijing’s favor.
- **Critical news on China is “downvoted” on Reddit:** Users of the link-sharing website Reddit are reporting that the service has become inundated with pro-China accounts that collectively “downvote” critical links about China, or that troll streams with comments matching Beijing’s propaganda. The trend is evident throughout the service on news, geopolitics, and area-focus subreddits. In a March 14 [BuzzFeed](#) report, *Sinocism* publisher Bill Bishop said the phenomenon was part of an “up-surge” in Chinese government accounts “taking the battle overseas to the global internet” over the past 18 months. While many on Reddit have suggested that this is an outgrowth of the long-standing government strategy of deploying paid internet commentators known as the “[50 cent party](#),” Bishop noted that it is impossible to know which comments represent government coordination and which are simply the product of Chinese nationalism.
- **New Chinese social media apps face foreign scrutiny:** As Chinese social media firms innovate and their applications gain worldwide popularity, the services’ controversial activity and users’ fears about data privacy have foreign regulators sounding the alarm. The short-video-sharing app [TikTok](#) (the [distinct international counterpart](#) of Douyin in China, also owned by ByteDance) agreed on February 28 to pay the US Federal Trade Commission [\\$5.7 million](#) for illegally collecting personal in-

formation from children. In India, where Chinese apps now make up [44](#) of the 100 most downloaded apps in Google’s Playstore, TikTok is in the crosshairs of the state government of Tamil Nadu. Officials there have called for an all-out [ban](#) on the grounds that the app allowed users to share sexual material and advertise prostitution. Within India’s ruling Bharatiya Janata Party, there have also been calls for a blanket ban of Chinese apps due to national security and data access concerns.

- Taiwan regulator mulls action on Chinese propaganda sites, streaming platforms:** As Chinese lawmakers reinforced official [rhetoric](#) on reunification with Taiwan, Taiwanese authorities voiced [stark concerns](#) about plans by Chinese tech giant Tencent to bring its video platform to the island. Taiwan’s Mainland Affairs Council (MAC) [stepped in](#) on March 15 after the government learned that Beijing was encouraging new media services to expand overseas, with Taiwan as a primary target. The MAC said it was concerned that Beijing would attempt to use the Tencent Video platform as an avenue to disseminate political propaganda. Taiwan’s National Communications Commission (NCC) [said](#) on the same day that permission for mainland-based streaming media would depend on national security considerations, and it called an interministerial meeting to discuss the fate of Tencent and Youku Tudou streaming services in Taiwan. Earlier, on [March 13](#), the NCC had announced that it would also decide whether to restrict [www.31t.tw](#), a Taiwan-registered website that has been promoting content strikingly similar to Chinese government propaganda.

FEATURED PUSHBACK

Assertive journalists at the two sessions

Restrictions on the media at the annual meetings of the National People’s Congress (NPC) and Chinese People’s Political Consultative Conference (CPPCC) this month were tight as usual, intended to preserve a carefully choreographed image of China’s leaders and political system.

Nevertheless, Chinese and foreign journalists took advantage of the rare opportunity to get

close to the country’s political and economic elite and ask provocative questions—also known as “doorstepping”—even when no answer was forthcoming. Videos and accounts of such efforts circulated on Twitter. [Bill Birtles](#) of the Australian Broadcasting Corporation shared a clip of a reporter asking Foreign Minister Wang Yi, “How many Taiwanese diplomatic allies will you take this year?” The Financial Times’ [Yang Yuanfen](#) shared a video of a Chinese reporter chasing down Tencent chief executive Pony Ma to ask, “Mr. Ma, at the Congress can you ask them not to block our account?”—pre-



Credit: [Cate Cadell](#)

sumably referring to censorship of his publication's public WeChat account.

Although substantive replies to such questions are rare, other forms of official reaction can be equally telling. [Xinjiang's delegation](#) to Beijing apparently arrived for their meeting an hour early in order to avoid 150 journalists who had gathered to report on it. As the delegates left, security officers cleared away reporters to prevent them from calling out questions, with one trying to seize the press pass of Agence France-Presse photographer [Pak Yiu](#). After [Cissy Wei Zhou](#) from Hong Kong's South China Morning Post pressed a CPPCC member on his view of the new foreign investment law, he reportedly covered his mouth and said, "My tongue is sick, cannot talk."

In past years, subtle and not-so-subtle critiques of China's media and propaganda system have emerged at the two sessions. In 2016, CPPCC delegate [Zhu Zhengfu](#) raised a proposal urging the party-state to be more prudent with the use of forced televised confessions, a trend that has accelerated under Xi Jinping's leadership. And last year, an expressive [eye-roll](#) by one journalist in response to a colleague's fawning question for a Chinese official went viral and provoked a whole new genre of internet memes.

WHAT TO WATCH FOR

- **Implementation of Xi Jinping's "media convergence" vision:** On March 15, [Seeking Truth \(Qiushi\)](#), China's top Communist Party policy journal, published the full text of a January speech that Xi made at a study session for members of the Politburo. Xi called for acceleration of media integration, a vision of propaganda tactics, regulation, and technology policy that goes far beyond the news sector to include "social, ideological, and cultural resources" and "[social management big data](#)," as a means of achieving greater political control and influence over public opinion. Watch for specific policy measures adopted to implement Xi's vision, including new efforts to incorporate artificial intelligence into news production and dissemination and initiatives to more effectively deliver party propaganda and narratives to mobile phone users inside and outside China.
- **Changes to proposed amendments of Hong Kong extradition rules:** After the Hong Kong government introduced draft amendments that would ease criminal extraditions last month, local democrats and human rights groups [criticized](#) the changes, citing the risk of exposure to the mainland's flawed justice system. Surprisingly, however, the normally proestablishment local and foreign business community, including the [American Chamber of Commerce](#), have also voiced concerns. Watch for whether the amendments are passed in their current form; partially revised, for instance to exclude economic crimes; or dropped entirely.
- **Democracies' responses to Chinese tech expansion:** Regulators and internet users in the United States, Taiwan, India, Canada, and elsewhere are increasingly coming to terms with the fact that freedom of expression, electoral integrity, and user privacy

may be threatened by the global expansion of applications like Tencent's WeChat and ByteDance's TikTok. Watch for any restrictions or penalties imposed in response, and for the ways in which government agencies in democratic settings try to strike a balance between open commerce on the one hand and national security and human rights on the other.

TAKE ACTION

- **Subscribe to the *China Media Bulletin*:** Have the bulletin's updates and insights delivered directly to your inbox each month, free of charge. Visit [here](#) or e-mail cmb@freedomhouse.org.
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- **Access uncensored content:** Find an overview comparing popular circumvention tools and information on how to access them via GreatFire.org, [here](#) or [here](#). Learn more about how to reach uncensored content and enhance digital security [here](#).
- **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 in China, see: *Freedom in the World 2018*, *Freedom of the Press 2017*, *Freedom on the Net 2018*, and *The Battle for China's Spirit: Religious Revival, Repression, and Resistance under Xi Jinping*



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

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