

Congressional-Executive Commission on China Roundtable
China's Treatment of Foreign Journalists
December 11, 2013

Sarah Cook, Senior Research Analyst for East Asia, Freedom House

Thank you Mr. Chairman and other members of the commission for convening this very timely and important roundtable discussion.

In my remarks this afternoon, I will focus on three aspects of the Chinese government's relationship with international media that reach beyond the obstructions targeting individual journalists based inside China.

- The use of collective punishment tactics to impede the work of news organizations and discourage the dissemination of certain critical reporting.
- The aspects of these dynamics that take place outside China's borders.
- The long-term impact of these pressures on news coverage, human rights, and media sustainability.

My remarks are primarily drawn from a report I authored that was published in October by the National Endowment for Democracy's Center for International Media Assistance titled *The Long Shadow of Chinese Censorship*. The full report is available [online](#) but I would like to submit the chapter on international media and another segment for the record alongside my testimony.

Collective Punishment

The impact of the obstacles other panelists have noted reaches beyond an individual journalist's career or physical safety, affecting the broader ability of news organizations to report from China. When American television correspondent Melissa Chan's visa renewal was refused, al-Jazeera English had to shutter its presence in China because no visa was granted for a replacement.ⁱ Bureau chiefs from U.S. outlets like the *New York Times* or the *Washington Post* have also been unsuccessful in securing visas, though their colleagues still report from inside the country.ⁱⁱ Several correspondents have told the Foreign Correspondent's Club of China that officials implied their visa delay was due to their predecessor's reporting.ⁱⁱⁱ

These examples reflect a broader phenomenon whereby the targets of Chinese sanctions expand beyond specifically offending content or an individual journalist to collective retaliation against an entire outlet, sometimes with notable financial implications. The Chinese government's multi-faceted reaction to investigative reports by Bloomberg and the *New York Times* in 2012 about large financial holdings by the kin of then Vice President Xi Jinping and Premier Wen Jiabao exemplify these dynamics.^{iv}

In both instances, the Chinese authorities chose to block the outlet's entire website indefinitely, an unusual move against major news organizations.^v This was despite the capacity of the country's refined Internet filters to block individual pages within a website—a tactic employed regularly to restrict access to articles deemed sensitive within otherwise tolerated sources. At present, both sites remained inaccessible from China. As the previous panelists have noted, both organizations have also faced significant challenges renewing or gaining new visas for their correspondents, including those uninvolved in the offending investigations.

Reflecting their varied business operations in China, the official retaliation against the two outlets manifested differently. For the *Times*, the blocking of not only its English but also of its newly launched Chinese-language website produced palpable financial losses. Overnight, the company's stock lost 20 percent of its value, though it slowly recovered over the following months.^{vi} The outlet was also forced to renegotiate agreements with numerous advertisers, causing revenue loss.^{vii}

Bloomberg's English-only website does not have a broad audience within China. The blocking thus seems motivated less by a wish to damage Bloomberg's access to Chinese readers, than by a desire to signal that finance-oriented news sources are not exempt from wholesale blocking if they embark on sensitive political investigations.^{viii} More central to Bloomberg's operations in China are its financial data terminals, used by large banks and firms.^{ix} The public gesture of blocking its website was combined with other threatening measures including having security agents tail some Bloomberg employees and Chinese bankers cancelling previously arranged meetings with the outlet's editor-in-chief.^x

Such actions appear to have deterred at least some would-be business partners and clients.^{xi} According to the Foreign Correspondents Club of China, Bloomberg "reportedly suffered significant commercial harm from a drop in sales of its data terminals."^{xii}

Geographic reach not limited to China

The geographic reach of obstructions to international news reporting is increasingly not limited to China. This trend manifests in several ways.

In early 2013, several news organizations—including the *New York Times*, the *Wall Street Journal*, and the *Washington Post*—publicized that they had been the victims of complex cyberattacks by Chinese hackers. The attacks not only targeted individual China-based journalists, but also infiltrated the companies' servers outside China. The attackers apparently wished to obtain pre-publication warning on reports critical of the Chinese government and to identify sources of information provided to foreign correspondents. Though the attacks could not be conclusively traced to Chinese government entities, several features lend credibility to that assertion.^{xiii}

In other instances, the connection to Chinese government actors has been more explicit as officials take direct action by pressuring international media executives and senior editors to take down or refrain from publishing a critical report.

Both the *New York Times* and Bloomberg were strongly urged to drop the articles about top leaders' family assets when Chinese officials became aware of the upcoming exclusives. After Bloomberg offered the Chinese government an opportunity to comment two weeks before publication, the Chinese ambassador to the United States met personally with the company's editor-in-chief in Washington alongside other behind-the-scenes pressure.^{xiv}

These pressures are not limited to the United States. In June 2013, the television station France 24 reported that Chinese embassy officials visited its Paris headquarters and met with the chief executive after it aired a brief documentary titled "Seven Days in Tibet." According to Reporters Without Borders, the diplomats denounced the piece and demanded its removal from the station's website, a request the outlet refused.^{xv} Without providing the full details, the FCCC noted similar incidents occurring in London and Berlin over reporting by the *Financial Times* and ARD TV, respectively.^{xvi}

Chinese security agents and local police have repeatedly harassed foreign journalists in Nepal who were reporting on the treatment of Tibetan refugees. In February 2012, a CNN crew reported that men appearing to be plainclothes Chinese security personnel crossed the border into Nepal and followed them deep into a Nepalese village as they tried to interview residents for a story on Tibetan refugees.^{xvii}

Long-Term Impact

Hard-hitting reporting from China continues to reach newsstands and television screens around the world. Nonetheless, the Chinese government's efforts to thwart independent investigations have taken a toll on international media coverage of the country.

When sources are intimidated into silence, journalists are forced to abandon potentially newsworthy stories—including on health issues like AIDS and deadly asbestos—or invest an inordinate amount of time and money to complete them.^{xviii}

Lack of unimpeded access to regions such as Xinjiang and Tibet has hindered independent investigations of severe crackdowns, enforced disappearances, and torture. Blocked access has sometimes forced overreliance on Chinese state media reports, whose unverified details—on the death toll during ethnic unrest, for example—eventually seep into Western news items as statements of fact. The blocking of foreign correspondents from Tiananmen Square in late October following an attack by a speeding SUV helped reinforce the Chinese government's questionable narrative that this was a premeditated assault by Uighur “terrorists.”^{xix}

Psychological elements add another dimension, as fears over physical safety, access to the country or family privacy can make reporters think twice about what they write. According to freelance journalist Paul Mooney, who at the time of our interview was awaiting a visa (which has since been denied), a cautious mood has settled over the foreign press corps over the past year:

I'm sure that a lot of journalists would deny being intimidated by such tactics... but I'm positive that some people buckle and keep away from certain “sensitive” topics because they're afraid of not getting a visa ... Recently, some colleagues have encouraged me to stop Tweeting and making comments about China on other social media and academic list serves, which we assume are being monitored. It's in the back of my mind all the time, but I've not curtailed what I do.^{xx}

Meanwhile, collective punishment tactics generate conflicting stances among departments within a news organization, as sales are potentially damaged or boosted by editorial decisions.

International media have oftentimes defiantly resisted direct and indirect pressures to alter their content, despite potential financial losses.

But not always. Even well respected outlets have faced allegations of self-censorship, sometimes with a lag time from when Chinese pressure was initially applied. The recent reports of apparent decisions by Bloomberg executives to curb the publication of stories investigating the links between Chinese tycoons and the political elite are one such example.^{xxi} In 2012, the *Washington Post's* then ombudsman, Patrick B. Pexton, questioned the paper's handling of an interview with Xi Jinping that was printed verbatim based on Chinese-dictated questions and replies. He noted the *Post's* difficulty securing visas and the receipt of significant income from a Chinese-state run advertorial insert as pressure points.^{xxii}

More broadly, a 2009 academic study found that reports about the Falun Gong spiritual practice in major Western news outlets and wire services were few and far between, despite the ongoing scale and severity of abuses suffered by its adherents.^{xxiii} The author cited self-censorship and CCP obstructions as two factors contributing to the phenomenon. Despite periodic stories, this trend has largely continued. Over the past year, dozens (and more likely hundreds) of Falun Gong adherents have been detained and sentenced to prison, in some cases for up to 12 years.^{xxiv} Yet there has been almost no coverage in major news outlets of the crackdown, despite its implications for how one might interpret other headline-grabbing developments like reform of the labor camp system.

The existence of self-censorship is difficult to conclusively document, but such incidents are nonetheless a reminder of the CCP's capacity to influence Western media reporting on China. As Pexton notes, "There is interdependence in the relationship, and constant negotiation and compromise. The Chinese know it, and they take advantage of it."^{xxv}

Much is at stake as this transnational contestation unfolds. Independent media outlets facing Chinese reprisals experience rising costs and loss of advertising revenue in an already competitive and financially challenging industry. Individual reporters encounter restrictive editorial policies, threats to their livelihood, and even physical injury. News consumers outside China are deprived of information for assessing the political stability of a major trading partner, responding to health and environmental crises, or taking action to support Chinese people's quest for a more free and just society.

For Chinese people, the stakes are even higher. In the age of microblogs, circumvention tools, international travel, and satellite television, overseas media outlets offer a vital source of information on matters with life-or-death consequences, be they torture, environmental pollution, or threats to public health. Their ability to function and report uncensored news promotes transparency and accountability in an opaque and arbitrary political system.

Absent a concerted international response to Chinese government obstructions, the situation is likely to further deteriorate as China's international role expands alongside a deep sense of Communist Party insecurity at home. Meanwhile, some measures initially aimed at restricting coverage of China could potentially be employed to affect reporting on important events in other societies. At one point, the heightened activity of Chinese hackers who had infiltrated the *New York Times* global server on the night of the 2012 U.S. presidential election reportedly prompted fears among senior editors that the site could be compromised at a critical time. Ultimately, the hackers were focused on the narrow objective of tracking information related to an exposé about the financial holdings of Premier Wen Jiabao's family, but the incident highlighted the potential for cyberattacks by the Chinese government or its sympathizers to impact coverage of political consequence in the United States.^{xxvi}

Recommendations

In terms of actions that the U.S. government might take in response, Vice President Biden's raising of this issue both privately and publicly during his recent visit to China is a welcome start. However, such statements must be backed up with real action and sanctions if the Chinese government does not heed such warnings. Otherwise, the United States risks sending the message that its concern over this issue is not genuine and that it is unwilling to put real political and diplomatic weight behind protecting the freedoms of its journalists—an outcome likely to only embolden Chinese government hostility towards foreign media.

As the United States government explores possible responses, Freedom House would strongly recommend taking a multi-lateral approach and consulting with like-minded government to formulate a united stance. Although most of the examples cited today have involved U.S.-based media, this is hardly a problem limited to American news organizations. There are hundreds of foreign correspondents based in China from dozens of countries and many of them face similar restrictions. A collective response from the United States, European governments, as well as perhaps Japan and Australia would carry greater weight

than a U.S.-only reaction. It would also leave the United States and American journalists less vulnerable to future retaliation.

Thank you again for holding this roundtable and for giving me an opportunity to contribute the above observations to the discussion.

-
- ⁱ “Al Jazeera English Forced Out of China,” Al Jazeera, May 9, 2012, <http://www.aljazeera.com/news/asia-pacific/2012/05/201257195136608563.html>.
- ⁱⁱ *Foreign Correspondents’ Club of China Annual Working Conditions 2013*; Will Sommer, “Post’s Chinese Visa Fight Ends With a Whimper,” *City Desk* (blog), *Washington City Paper*, September 17, 2012, <http://www.washingtoncitypaper.com/blogs/citydesk/2012/09/17/posts-chinese-visa-fight-ends-with-a-whimper/>.
- ⁱⁱⁱ *Foreign Correspondents’ Club of China Annual Working Conditions 2013*.
- ^{iv} Michael Martina, “Bloomberg Sites Blocked in China Days After Xi Family Wealth Story,” Reuters, July 4, 2012, <http://www.reuters.com/article/2012/07/04/us-china-censorship-bloomberg-idUSBRE86306820120704>; Keith Bradsher, “China Blocks Web Access to Times After Article,” *New York Times*, October 25, 2012, <http://www.nytimes.com/2012/10/26/world/asia/china-blocks-web-access-to-new-york-times.html>.
- ^v Simon Rabinovitch, “China Keeps Up Block on Bloomberg Website,” *Financial Times* (London), July 28, 2012, <http://www.ft.com/intl/cms/s/0/4965b226-d952-11e1-8529-00144feab49a.html#axzz2aksVfw2D>.
- ^{vi} “The New York Times Company,” Yahoo! Finance, <http://finance.yahoo.com/q/hp?s=NYT&a=6&b=16&c=1986&d=6&e=17&f=2013&g=d&z=66&y=132>.
- ^{vii} Margaret Sullivan, “‘Great Journalism’ That Has Unwanted Business Impact in China,” *New York Times*, October 26, 2012, <http://publiceditor.blogs.nytimes.com/2012/10/26/great-journalism-that-has-unwanted-business-impact-in-china/>.
- ^{viii} Traditionally, though not always, the Chinese authorities have been more tolerant of critical reporting related to financial and economic matters, compared to political or human rights ones.
- ^{ix} Nonetheless, China remains a relatively small market for the terminals, with about 3,000 operating compared to 10,000 in Hong Kong and 100,000 in the United States, according to Howard Winn of the *South China Morning Post*. Howard Winn, “Sino-Bloomberg Relations Remain Unsettled After Xi Story,” *South China Morning Post* (Hong Kong), September 14, 2012, <http://www.scmp.com/business/article/1036193/sino-bloomberg-relations-remain-unsettled-after-xi-story>.
- ^x Rabinovitch, “China Keeps Block on Bloomberg.”
- ^{xi} Ibid; Winn, “Sino-Bloomberg Relations.”
- ^{xii} *Foreign Correspondents’ Club of China Annual Working Conditions 2013*.
- ^{xiii} Nicole Perlroth, “Hackers in China Attacked the Times for Last 4 Months,” *New York Times*, January 30, 2013, <http://www.nytimes.com/2013/01/31/technology/chinese-hackers-infiltrate-new-york-times-computers.html?pagewanted=all>; Jonathan Kaiman, “New York Times Claims Chinese Hackers Hijacked Its Systems,” *Guardian* (London), January 31, 2013, <http://www.theguardian.com/media/2013/jan/31/new-york-times-chinese-hacked>.
- ^{xiv} Winn, “Sino-Bloomberg Relations.”
- ^{xv} The journalist who filmed the segment undercover during a seven-day visit to Tibet also received harassing and threatening messages from Chinese diplomats in Thailand while visiting Bangkok. “Chinese Diplomats Threaten French Journalist After Tibet Report,” Reporters Without Borders, June 11, 2013, <http://en.rsfs.org/chine-chinese-diplomats-threaten-french-11-06-2013.44762.html>.
- ^{xvi} *Foreign Correspondents’ Club of China Annual Working Conditions*.
- ^{xvii} Sara Sidner, “Is China Pushing Nepal to Crack Down on Tibetans,” CNN, February 22, 2012, <http://edition.cnn.com/2012/02/21/world/asia/china-tibet-nepal>.

xviii Paul Mooney, email communication to author, July 10, 2013.

xix Sarah Cook, "Be Skeptical of the Official Story on the Tiananmen Car Crash," Freedom at Issue (Freedom House blog), November 4, 2013, <http://www.freedomhouse.org/blog/be-skeptical-official-story-tiananmen-car-crash>

xx Mooney email interview.

xxi Edward Wong, "Bloomberg News is Said to Curb Articles that Might Anger China," *The New York Times*, November 8, 2013, http://www.nytimes.com/2013/11/09/world/asia/bloomberg-news-is-said-to-curb-articles-that-might-anger-china.html?_r=0

xxii Patrick B. Pexton, "Caving to China's Demands," *Washington Post*, February 24, 2012, http://articles.washingtonpost.com/2012-02-24/opinions/35442979_1_transcript-mutual-benefit-questions.

xxiii Leeshai Lemish, "Media and New Religious Movements: The Case of Falun Gong" (paper, 2009 CESNUR Conference, Salt Lake City, UT, June 11–13, 2009), http://www.cesnur.org/2009/slc_lemish.htm.

xxiv Interviews with Chinese activists who wished to remain anonymous, November 2013; Falun Dafa Information Center, "Reports Confirm Ongoing Persecution in China Despite Labor Camp Closures," October 10, 2013, <http://www.faluninfo.net/article/1305/Reports-Confirm-Ongoing-Persecution-in-China-Despite-Labor-Camp-Closures/?cid=84>.

xxv Pexton, "Caving to China's Demands."

xxvi Perlroth, "Hackers in China" (see n. xiii).