

Background

- More than 2,200 newspapers, 7,000 magazines and journals, 1,000 radio stations, 700 television stations, and some 3,000 cable channels have sprung up in China since a partial privatization of the media sector.
- Despite their numbers and increased responsiveness to the market rather than the Party, the Central Propaganda Department has tried to keep a tight grip on the media.
- Under the pretext of state subversion and secrets laws, journalists are subject to fines, dismissals, demotions, lawsuits, and imprisonment. Offending news agencies are frequently closed and their editors fired.
- The leadership's crackdown on the media can be traced to the Communist Party of China's fourth plenum held in September 2004, when strengthening ideological control over the media became a focus of Party work. In the run-up to the Party's 17th congress held in October 2007, efforts to control the media intensified, including a two-month crackdown on "fake news" and the urging of reporters to "create a positive atmosphere for public opinion."
- It appears that the Hu-Wen leadership team, which initially welcomed media reporting on previously taboo subjects such as official corruption and social unrest, is as willing as its predecessors to gag the media when the debate goes beyond the officially sanctioned parameters that the Party has set.

MEDIA CONTROL & THE OLYMPIC GAMES

Since January 1, 2007, the Foreign Correspondents Club of China has logged more than 300 cases of reporting interference. During the Olympic Games, several incidents were reported:

- **August 20, 2008:** Two Associated Press photographers attempting to cover a Free Tibet protest were roughed up and briefly detained by plainclothes police officers, who confiscated the memory cards from their cameras.
- **August 13, 2008:** John Ray, a reporter for Britain's Independent Television News, was roughed up and briefly detained by police after covering a Free Tibet protest.
- **August 4, 2008:** Two Japanese journalists were beaten by paramilitaries while trying to cover the aftermath of attacks on police forces in the western province of Xinjiang. The police apologized the next day.
- **July 22, 2008:** At least four Hong Kong journalists were manhandled by police while they were covering an outbreak of violence among a crowd of people trying to buy Olympic tickets.

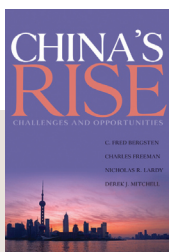
Current Situation

- In their 2007 index of press freedom, Reporters Without Borders ranked China 163 out of 169 countries surveyed. According to the group's 2008 Annual Report, China was the world's leading jailer of journalists for the eighth consecutive year, with an estimated 33 journalists in detention.
- Recently issued media rules seem to confirm a trend toward a more restrictive media atmosphere. These rules include the Emergency Response Law, implemented in August 2007, which fines news agencies that report on "local emergencies" (including natural disasters and health crises) without permission from local authorities, and Measures for Administering the Release of News and Information in China by Foreign News Agencies, which give Xinhua the power to censor and distribute news from foreign news agencies.
- In the run-up to the 2008 Beijing Olympics and in response to international criticism, China introduced foreign media rule changes, set to expire in October 2008, that included such changes as allowing foreign journalists to travel freely and report without needing to obtain the permission of local authorities. In practice, however, local authorities did not always comply (see box).
- During the Olympic Games, the authorities issued a 21-point regulation to the domestic media detailing "off-limit" topics, including the easing of Internet censorship, Tibet and Xinjiang independence movements, food safety issues, and public protests. In addition, domestic media were forbidden from making negative comments on the opening ceremony and were instructed to play down territorial disputes, the Myanmar situation, and any fall in TV ratings.

- At the same time, however, given the plethora of media outlets and "new media" sources, the Party is aware that it cannot exert total control and has allowed the parameters of debate to widen on topics previously considered taboo, including China's economic development, foreign policy, and even political reform. The 24-hour media coverage of the Sichuan earthquake by domestic and foreign reporters was unprecedented. Rather than try to block the media, the leadership used it to its advantage to garner support for the "heroic effort" of the authorities to respond to the disaster—suggesting a more sophisticated approach to the media moving forward.

Implications

- Whether the media crackdown is a phase in the Party's typically fluctuating approach to media liberalization or the sign of a fundamental policy shift is yet to be seen and needs to be closely monitored.
- The long-term impact of the Olympics on media freedom is also yet to be seen. Domestic media faced strict regulations throughout the event, and changes to foreign media reporting rules will have little impact if allowed to expire.
- Observers should also recognize that the privatization of media now unfolding in China may signal some greater openness in the future. However, for the vast majority of Chinese media, commercialization provides incentive for media managers and journalists to be risk-averse.
- Pressing Beijing for improvements in its record on media freedom should be an indispensable part of the United States' China policy, and support for NGOs who monitor the situation should be continued. At the same time, such efforts should be accompanied by informed and realistic expectations.



FOR FURTHER INFORMATION:
SEE CHAPTER 3: "CHINA'S DOMESTIC TRANSFORMATION: DEMOCRATIZATION OR DISORDER?"
IN *CHINA: THE BALANCE SHEET: WHAT THE WORLD NEEDS TO KNOW NOW ABOUT THE EMERGING SUPERPOWER* BY C. FRED BERGSTEN, BATES GILL, NICHOLAS LARDY, DEREK J. MITCHELL