
CFR Backgrounders

Media Censorship in China

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Introduction

The Chinese government has long kept tight reins on both traditional and new media to avoid potential subversion of its authority. Its tactics often entail strict media controls using monitoring systems and firewalls, shuttering publications or websites, and jailing dissident journalists, bloggers, and activists. [Google's battle](#) with the Chinese government over internet censorship and the Norwegian Nobel Committee's awarding of the 2010 Peace Prize to jailed Chinese activist Liu Xiaobo have also increased international attention to censorship issues. At the same time, the country's burgeoning economy relies on the web for growth, and experts say the growing need for internet freedom is testing the regime's control.

Official Media Policy

China's [constitution](#) affords its citizens freedom of speech and press, but the opacity of Chinese media regulations allows authorities to crack down on news stories by claiming that they expose state secrets and endanger the country. The definition of state secrets in China remains vague, facilitating censorship of any information that authorities [deem harmful \(PDF\)](#) to their political or economic interests. CFR Senior Fellow Elizabeth C. Economy says the Chinese government is in a state of "schizophrenia" about media policy as it "goes back and forth, testing the line, knowing they need press freedom and the information it provides, but worried about opening the door to the type of freedoms that could lead to the regime's downfall."

The government issued in May 2010 its first [white paper](#) on the internet that focused on the concept of "internet sovereignty," requiring all internet users in China, including foreign organizations and individuals, to abide by Chinese laws and regulations. Chinese internet companies are now required to sign the "[Public Pledge on Self-Regulation and Professional Ethics for China Internet Industry](#)," which entails even stricter rules than those in the white paper, according to [Jason Q. Ng](#), a specialist on Chinese media censorship and author of [Blocked on Weibo](#). Since Chinese President Xi Jinping came to power, censorship of all forms of media has tightened. In February 2016, Xi announced new media policy for party and state news outlines: "All the work by the party's [media must reflect](#) the party's will, safeguard the party's authority, and safeguard the party's unity," emphasizing that state media must align themselves with the "thought, politics, and actions" of the party leadership. A *China Daily* essay emphasized Xi's policy, noting that "the nation's media outlets are essential [to political stability](#)."

How Free Is Chinese Media?

In 2016, Freedom House [ranked](#) China last for the second consecutive year out of sixty-five countries that represent 88 percent of the world's internet users. The France-based watchdog group Reporters Without Borders ranked China 176 out of 180 countries in its 2016 worldwide [index of press freedom](#). Experts say Chinese media outlets usually employ their own monitors to ensure political acceptability of their content. Censorship guidelines are circulated weekly from the Communist Party's propaganda department and the government's Bureau of Internet Affairs to prominent editors and media providers.

"All the work by the party's media must reflect the party's will, safeguard the party's authority, and safeguard the party's unity."—Chinese President Xi Jinping

Certain websites that the government deems potentially dangerous—like Wikipedia, Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, and some Google services—are fully blocked or temporarily “blacked out” during periods of controversy, such as the June 4 anniversary of the Tiananmen Square massacre or Hong Kong's Umbrella Movement protests in the fall of 2014. [Specific material](#) considered a threat to political stability is also banned, including controversial photos and video, as well as search terms. The government is particularly keen on blocking reports of issues that could incite social unrest, like official corruption, the economy, health and environmental scandals, certain religious groups, and ethnic strife. The websites of Bloomberg news service, the *New York Times*, and other major international publications have periodically been blacked out, their journalists harassed and threatened, and visa applications denied. In 2012, Bloomberg and the *New York Times* both [ran reports](#) on the private wealth of then Party Secretary Xi Jinping and Premier Wen Jiabao. Restrictions have been also placed on micro-blogging services, often in response to sensitive subjects like corruption, including 2012 rumors of an attempted coup in Beijing involving the disgraced former Chongqing party chief Bo Xilai. Censors are also swift to block any mention of violent incidents related to Tibet or China's Xinjiang Autonomous Region, home to the mostly Muslim Uighur minority group, and the Falun Gong spiritual movement.

The Censorship Groups

More than a [dozen government bodies](#) review and enforce laws related to information flow within, into, and out of China. The most powerful monitoring body is the Communist Party's Central Propaganda Department (CPD), which coordinates with General Administration of Press and Publication and State Administration of Radio, Film, and Television to ensure content promotes party doctrine. Ng says that the various ministries once functioned as smaller fiefdoms of control, but have recently been more consolidated under the State Council Information Office, which has taken the lead on internet monitoring.

The Chinese government employs large numbers of people to monitor and censor China's media. Experts refer to an October 2013 report in a state-run paper, the *Beijing News*, which said more than [two million workers](#) are responsible for reviewing internet posts using keyword searches and compiling reports for “decision makers.” These so-called “public opinion analysts” are hired both by the state and private companies to constantly monitor China's internet. Additionally, the CPD gives media outlets editorial guidelines as well as directives restricting coverage of politically sensitive topics. In one [high-profile incident](#) involving the liberal Guangdong magazine *Southern Weekly*, government censors rewrote the paper's New Year's message from a call for reform to a tribute to the Communist Party. The move triggered [mass demonstrations](#) by the staff and general public, who demanded the resignation of the local propaganda bureau chief. While staff and censors reached a compromise that theoretically intended to relax some controls, much of the censorship remained in

place.

Exerting Control

The Chinese government deploys myriad ways of censoring the internet. The Golden Shield Project, colloquially known as the **Great Firewall**, is the center of the government's online censorship and surveillance effort. Its methods include bandwidth throttling, keyword filtering, and **blocking access** to certain websites. According to Reporters Without Borders, the firewall makes large-scale use of **Deep Packet Inspection technology** to block access based on keyword detection. As Ng points out, the government also employs a **diverse range of methods** to induce journalists to censor themselves, including dismissals and demotions, libel lawsuits, fines, arrests, and forced televised confessions.

"To the degree that China's connection to the outside world matters, the digital links are deteriorating." —Evan Osnos, New Yorker

As of February 2017, thirty-eight journalists were **imprisoned in China**, according to the Committee to Protect Journalists, a U.S.-based watchdog on press freedom issues. In 2009, Chinese rights activist Liu Xiaobo **was sentenced** to eleven years in prison for advocating democratic reforms and freedom of speech in **Charter 08**, a 2008 statement signed by more than two thousand prominent Chinese citizens that called for political and human rights reforms and an end to one-party rule. When Liu won the Nobel Peace Prize, censors blocked the news in China. A year later, journalist Tan Zuoren **was sentenced** to five years in prison for drawing attention to government corruption and poor construction of school buildings that collapsed and killed thousands of children during the 2008 earthquake in Sichuan province. Early 2014 saw the government **detain Gao Yu**, a columnist who was jailed on accusations of leaking a **Party communiqué titled Document 9**.

The State Internet Information Office tightened content restrictions in 2013 and appointed a **new director of a powerful internet committee** led by President Xi Jinping, who assumed power in late 2012. A **July 2014 directive** on journalist press passes bars reporters from releasing information from interviews or press conferences on social media without permission of their employer media organizations. And in early 2015, the government **cracked down on virtual private networks** (VPNs), making it more difficult to access U.S. sites like Google and Facebook. "By blocking these tools, the authorities are leaving people with fewer options and are forcing most to give up on circumvention and switch to domestic services," **writes Charlie Smith** [pseudonym], a co-founder of FreeWeibo.com and activist website GreatFire.org. "If they can convince more internet users to use Chinese services—which they can readily censor and easily snoop on—then they have taken one further step towards cyber sovereignty." The restrictions mount on a regular basis, adds the *New Yorker's* Evan Osnos. "To the degree that China's connection to the outside world matters, the digital links are deteriorating," he wrote **in an April 2015 article**. "How many countries in 2015 have an internet connection to the world that is worse than it was a year ago?"

Foreign Media

China requires foreign correspondents to obtain permission before reporting in the country and has used this as an administrative roadblock to prevent journalists from reporting on potentially sensitive topics like corruption and, increasingly, economic and financial developments. Under Xi, the ability of foreign journalists and international news outlets to travel and access to sources have shrunk. "The hostile environment against foreign journalists is being fueled by efforts to publicly mark Western media outlets as not only biased, but part of a coordinated international effort to **damage China's**

[reputation \(PDF\)](#),” according to PEN America’s 2016 report on the constraints of foreign journalists reporting from China. Eighty percent of respondents in a 2014 survey conducted by the [Foreign Correspondents’ Club of China](#) said their work conditions had worsened or stayed the same compared to 2013. International journalists regularly face government intimidation, surveillance, and restrictions on their reporting, writes freelance China correspondent [Paul Mooney](#), who was denied a visa in 2013.

“Some people in China don’t look at freedom of speech as an abstract ideal, but more as a means to an end.”
—Emily Parker

Austin Ramzy, a China reporter for the *New York Times*, relocated to Taiwan in early 2014 after [failing to receive](#) his accreditation and visa. *New York Times* reporter Chris Buckley was reported to have been expelled in early January 2013—[an incident](#) China’s foreign ministry said was a visa application suspension due to improper credentials. China observers were also notably shaken by [the 2013 suspension](#) of Bloomberg’s former China correspondent, Michael Forsythe, after Bloomberg journalists accused the news agency of withholding investigative articles for fear of reprisal from Chinese authorities.

The treatment of foreign reporters has become a diplomatic issue. In response to the [Arab Spring](#) protests in early 2011, then Secretary of State Hillary Clinton pledged to continue U.S. efforts to [weaken censorship \(PDF\)](#) in countries with repressive governments like China and Iran. In response, Beijing warned Washington to [not meddle](#) in the internal affairs of other countries. On a December 2013 trip to Beijing, then Vice President Joe Biden pressed China publicly and privately about press freedom, [directly raising the issue](#) in talks with Chinese President Xi Jinping and meetings with U.S. journalists working in China.

U.S. Technology in China

In more recent years, China has made it exceedingly difficult for foreign technology firms to compete within the country. The websites of U.S. social media outlets like Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram are blocked. Google, after a protracted battle with Chinese authorities over the banning of search terms, quietly [gave up](#) its fight in early 2013 by turning off a notification that alerted Chinese users of potential censorship. In late 2014, [China banned Google’s email service Gmail](#), a move that triggered a concerned response [from the U.S. State Department](#).

In January 2015, China issued [new cybersecurity regulations](#) that would force technology firms to submit source code, undergo rigorous inspections, and adopt Chinese encryption algorithms. The move triggered an outcry from European and U.S. companies, who [lobbied governmental authorities](#) for urgent aid in reversing the implementation of new regulations. CFR Senior Fellow [Adam Segal writes](#) that “the fact that the regulations come from the central leading group, and that they seem to reflect an ideologically driven effort to control cyberspace at all levels, make it less likely that Beijing will back down.”

Circumventing the Censors

Despite the systematic control of news, the Chinese public has found numerous ways to circumvent censors. [Ultrasurf](#), Psiphon, and [Freegate](#) are popular software programs that allow Chinese users to set up proxy servers to avoid controls. While VPNs are also popular, the government crackdown on the systems have led users to [devise other methods](#), including the insertion of new IP addresses into host files, [Tor](#)—a free software program for anonymity—or SSH tunnels, which route all internet

traffic through a remote server. According to Congress, between [1 and 8 percent \(PDF\)](#) of Chinese internet users use proxy servers and VPNs to get around firewalls.

Microblogging sites like Weibo have also become primary spaces for Chinese netizens to voice opinion or discuss taboo subjects. “Over the years, in a series of cat-and-mouse games, Chinese internet users have developed an extensive series of puns—both visual and homophonous—slang, acronyms, memes, and images to skirt restrictions and censors,” writes Ng.

Google’s chairman, Eric Schmidt, said in early 2014 that [encryption could help](#) the company penetrate China. But such steps experienced a setback in March 2014 when authorities cracked down on social [networking app WeChat](#) (known as Weixin in China), deleting prominent, politically liberal accounts. Soon thereafter, the government [announced new regulations](#) on “instant messaging tools” aimed at mobile chat applications such as WeChat, which has more than [750 million users](#) and was increasingly seen as replacing Weibo as a platform for popular dissent that could skirt censors. CFR’s Economy says that the internet has increasingly become a means for Chinese citizens to ensure official accountability and rule of law, noting the [growing importance](#) of social network sites as a political force inside China despite government restrictions.

China had roughly [731 million](#) internet users in 2017. Although there have been [vocal calls](#) for total press freedom in China, some experts point to a more nuanced discussion of the ways in which the internet is revolutionizing the Chinese media landscape and a society that is demanding more information. “Some people in China don’t look at [freedom of speech](#) as an abstract ideal, but more as a means to an end,” writes author Emily Parker. Rather, the fight for free expression fits into a larger context of burgeoning citizen attention to other, more pertinent social campaigns like environmental degradation, social inequality, and corruption—issues for which they use the internet and media as a means of disseminating information, says Ng.

Additional Resources

New York Times reporter Edward Wong discusses the state of journalism in China on this [January 2017 episode](#) of the Sinica Podcast.

Freedom House profiles China’s internet freedom scores in its report [Freedom on the Net 2016](#).

PEN America chronicled the challenge of reporting from China in its 2016 report [Darkened Screen: Constraints on Foreign Journalists in China \(PDF\)](#).

Researchers analyze the [escalation](#) of state-level information control in China after a Distributed Denial of Service (DDoS) attack in March 2015 in a Citizen Lab report.

CFR Senior Fellow Elizabeth C. Economy discusses the impact of the internet on Chinese social protest in this [Congressional testimony](#).

Blogger and activist Michael Anti (Jing Zhao) discusses Chinese internet controls in [this TED talk](#).

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