To the members and staff of the Congressional-Executive Commission on China.

Statement submitted for panel on July 31, 2009.

My name is James Fallows; I am a national correspondent for the *Atlantic Monthly*, returned two weeks ago to Washington, DC after a three-year assignment in China. During that time I wrote many articles about China as well as a book, and had experiences dealing with both public and private organizations in China as a reporter. I am sorry that a sudden case of flu and laryngitis prevents me from making my comments in person today. Instead I will send a brief statement covering the points I intended to make. I would welcome an opportunity to answer any further questions or to join you another time.

In my introductory statement I intended to make three points about the current state of reportage and public discussion in China. In addition, I have supplied to the Commission staff reprints of two relevant articles I wrote for *The Atlantic* while in China. The first, called "The Connection Has Been Reset" (March 2008), was about the technological and political underpinnings of the system of internet control known informally as "the Great Firewall." The second, "Their Own Worst Enemy" (November 2008) examined the reasons for the Chinese central government's often self-defeating attempts to control the way it is portrayed in international media.

The three points I offer for discussion are these:

1) The Chinese system of media control, as it affects foreign and domestic

reporters working inside the country and the information available to the Chinese public about their country and the outside world, should not be thought of as consistent, airtight, centrally coordinated, or reflecting a carefully thought-out long-term strategy. Instead it should be understood as episodic, hit-or-miss, rigid in some places and lax in others, and highly variable by region, time, and personality of those in charge.

Anyone who has worked in China has illustrations of apparently illogical or inexplicable variations in media control policy. One day, a set of web sites with information about "sensitive" subjects will be blanked out by the Great Firewall; the next day, they will be available. During the violence in Tibet in 2008, CNN coverage was generally cut off as soon as anyone mentioned the word "Tibet"; meanwhile, similar BBC reports were through unhindered. During that same period of violence, Tibet was generally closed to foreign correspondents; this year, during the violence in Xinjiang, the government organized press tours for international reporters.

The Beijing Olympics was replete with such contradictory episodes, the most famous of which involved the "authorized" protest zones. (As was widely reported around the world, the central government set aside zones for authorized demonstrations and protests during the Games, as a sign of its openness and international spirit; then, local security authorities turned down all requests for authorization and arrested some people who applied.) In my own case, I dealt frequently with government officials who were fully aware that (for no apparent reason) I had been denied a regular journalist visa and was working as a journalist in China on a variety of "business" and educational visas. The inconsistency was fine, as long as I wasn't otherwise in trouble.

Of course central guidance does come down about media and internet

censorship; of course there is some coordination. My point is that outsiders sometimes miss the irregularity and oddities of the "control" system, which make press coverage both easier and harder. It is easier in that there is often a side door when the front door is closed. It is harder in that uncertainty about what might cause trouble leads people to be more careful than they might otherwise be. If you never know where the line is, you take care not to cross it.

2) The government is most successful in justifying its media controls when it positions them as defenses against foreign criticism of China as a whole. This approach is of course not unique to China or its government. But in my experience it is particularly important to bear in mind there, because the theme comes up so often in the foreign reporters' work within China and is always a potential factor.

For reasons familiar to all of us, daily life in modern China doesn't naturally support strong feelings of nationalistic unity among the highly diverse and often fractious billion-plus people of the country. People are focused on their families, their businesses, they regional or local rivalries or ambitions. It is easiest to make people feel and at as "we Chinese" in response to the idea of being disrespected, unfairly treated, or victimized by the outside world. Again, unity in response to foreign challenge is hardly unique to China. But the role of the Western press is unusually important here, since in my experience it is one of the most reliable levers the government can pull to induce nationalistic solidarity. (The other reliable lever is anti-Japanese sentiment, but that's a problem of its own.)

I believe that every foreign reporter working in China has had the experience of crossing a certain line in reaction from the Chinese public —

especially from the “netizen” part of the public with recourse to blogs and email. If discussion of certain problems in China is seen as “pro-Chinese,” in the sense of helping Chinese people deal with local pollution issues (or unfair labor practices, or water shortages, etc), that is fine. But at a certain point, discussion of problems can shift to being seen as “anti-Chinese” or, in the famous epithet, “hurting the feelings of the Chinese people.” This is obvious in starkest form in the organized effort against CNN because of its coverage of the Tibetan violence and the disruption of the Olympic torch relay. I believe awareness of potentially hostile and voluminous reaction from web-based *fenqing*, the much discussed “angry youth,” is somewhere in the consciousness of most foreign reporters working in China — along with the numerous friendships and supportive relationships most foreign reporters make with individual Chinese people.

I mention this phenomenon because of the unusual public-private interaction it seems to represent. When web-based campaigns against foreign reporters or news organizations flare up in China, they seem genuinely to involve private individuals or informal bands of netizens. But clearly the government plays a crucial role in setting the conditions for this reaction: in its control of information and media, for instance in the educational program which gives nearly all citizens of the PRC the same understanding of the history of Tibet; in the version of the news that comes through the officials newspapers and broadcast channels; and in the “hurting the feelings of the Chinese people” denunciations it issues of the foreign media.

The most recent illustration of this pattern is domestic discussion of the H1N1/“swine flu” issue. China’s quarantine policy is far stricter than that of any other country, and out of line with what the WHO and other organizations have recommended. But I found that when I pointed this out in dispatches for the

Atlantic, I was deluged with complaints from Chinese netizens about "disrespect" for a government that was being far more scrupulous with its public health preparations than was the lax Western world.

In short, the Chinese public is highly intelligent, argumentative, eager to gain and exchange information. But it operates in circumstances that favor the government's ability to shunt the discussion away from criticism of its policies.

3) The spread of the internet through China has made it both harder and easier for the government to keep discussion within limits it desires. I know that other witnesses intend to address this issue, and I discuss it at length in my "Connection Has Been Reset" article that I have submitted. I believe that the outside world is well past the period in which people automatically assumed that the spread of information technology would undermine authoritarian regimes. The additional point I'd made about press coverage is that the same dual aspect affects foreign reporters' work in the country. It is *vastly* easier to make connections and find information now, because of the internet and related technology, than it was in the mid-1980s when I first worked in East Asia. But now reporters have the complication of knowing that their work is being read not simply by government minders but by large number of Chinese readers, some of whom know just enough English to misunderstand what a report is saying. This is a complex phenomenon that I'll be happy to discuss in other circumstances.

There are many more aspects of this complex topic to examine. I am sorry not to be able to join you in person today, but I look forward to another opportunity.   James Fallows