CONGRESSIONAL-EXECUTIVE COMMISSION ON CHINA
ROUND TABLE

"REPORTING THE NEWS IN CHINA: FIRST-HAND ACCOUNTS AND CURRENT TRENDS

OPENING STATEMENT

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I am delighted that the Congressional Executive Commission on China has organized a panel to discuss how the news is reported in China by Chinese and American journalists.

China has a tradition of state censorship that goes back more than 1000 years. The current political regime, led by the Chinese Communist Party, has controlled political information far more effectively than any government in the country's history. Yet Beijing's rulers face a dilemma. On the one hand, freedom of information is invaluable for making business decisions in the global economy, technological transfers, and scholarly exchange. On the other hand, media freedom has facilitated democracy movements in countries such as Mexico, Hungary, Taiwan, Indonesia, and Czechoslovakia. Media freedom is good for China's economy and public welfare but likely to weaken the CCP's political hegemony, as journalists expose policy failures and political activists use the Internet to organize demonstrations. The CCP controls Chinese media because its primary objective is to remain in power. In the last three decades, however, media commercialization, the growth of journalistic professionalism, cell phone use, and the Internet have made information control more difficult than ever.

Mao-Era Media

Since the founding of the People's Republic on October 1, 1949, the CCP has sought to dominate all forms of political communication. The Central Propaganda Department of the Communist Party guided policies that placed media under party leadership, nationalized privately owned media, and divested foreign newspapers of the right to publish in China. Police, customs agents, and postal workers confiscated "imperialist" and "counter-revolutionary" literature.

In the early 1950s, the *People's Daily* newspaper emerged as the mouthpiece of the Communist Party Central Committee and bellwether for the views of Mao Zedong and other national leaders. Xinhua News Service assumed a central role in disseminating carefully vetted reports around the country. Media at central, provincial, and municipal levels became "mouthpieces" of the CCP. Working though the State Press and Publications Administration, the Central Propaganda Department orchestrated the closure of media that did not comply with party directives. By 1956, China had established what Peter Kenez has called a "propaganda state," with the country's entire media industry and education system firmly under party control. Mao's media proved to be effective tools for mobilizing the public in support of China's socialist transformation. While the stability of China's propaganda system was punctuated by events, such as the Hundred Flowers Campaign (1956-57), and the chaos of the Cultural Revolution (1966-76), leaders with the upper hand in Chinese politics have tightly controlled media content and operations.

Media Commercialization in the Reform Era

The death of Mao made possible the ascent of reformers, led by Deng Xiaoping. Far from an advocate of media freedom, Deng supported measures to commercialize the media industry so as to make it profitable and more attractive to consumers. The goal of commercialization was to revitalize media's propaganda role by repackaging the news. Party and state institutions retained power over commercial media by controlling ownership, personnel appointments, and cracking down on media that failed comply with content directives issued by central and local branches of the Propaganda Department.

The result was a media system that combined the characteristics of Soviet-style media with Western media management strategies. My analysis of the newspaper content from 1980 to 2003 has shown that commercial media, in some cases, grew freer to criticize minor political problems, without jettisoning their propaganda role or challenging party leaders with substantial power to repress offending journalists.

Media commercialization during the Reform Era (1978-present) changed the incentives for media, which recognized that freer, less doctrinaire reporting appeals to the public. When opportunities appeared, greater media freedom has emerged, although local, rather than central, officials are the targets of critical news reports. In colloquial parlance, Chinese media "swat flies" but do not "hit tigers." Powerful political and economic interests can coerce or bribe media to abandon potentially embarrassing stories.

Nevertheless, studies by Chinese communications scholars have documented a new ethos of professionalism among Chinese journalists. Strict adherence to the party line does not always trump the public's right to know about a natural disaster or the spread of a disease. Journalists who believe in their professional obligation to inform the public have found work in media, such as the *Southern Metropolitan News*, *Southern Weekend*, or *Caijing Magazine*. These media have encouraged reporters to push the limits of central government restrictions. Notable examples of investigative stories with a national impact have been reporting on the 2003 murder of graphic artist Sun Zhigang in a detention center for migrant workers, the 2007 exposure of slavery in brick kilns in Shanxi Province, and reports about the shoddy construction of school buildings that led to the deaths of thousands of children during the 2008 Sichuan earthquake. In the latter case, journalists from around China refused to comply with bans against going to Sichuan to report on location. Windows of freedom, so to speak, have been flung open and media have challenged the actions of local government before the Propaganda Department could regain control.

The government at all levels is concerned with public opinion and seeks to conceal interventions in news reporting. Those who reveal acts of censorship take great risks in doing so. With few exceptions, media respect government bans on reporting certain stories; journalists eschew politically sensitive reporting. Rife corruption among journalists and a salary scale that rewards reporters for politically correct reports contribute to self-censorship.[1] Nonetheless, a few journalists have succeeded in shedding light on isolated problems and acts of injustice; this has been done by reporting the news before the government issues a ban.

The Internet and Media Freedom

The growing wealth of Chinese citizens has given hundreds of millions of people the means to acquire new information and communications technologies for personal use. At least 650 million Chinese use cellular telephones—and more than 100 million use cell phones to access the internet. Three hundred million Chinese have gone online, a number equivalent to the population of the United States. There are now over 160 million bloggers in China, according to Chinese official statistics released early this year. Content analysis research has shown that political expression in Chinese blogs is much freer than

[1] Ashley Esarey, "Speak No Evil: Mass Media Control in Contemporary China", Freedom at Issue: A Special Freedom House Report, February 2006, http://www.freedomhouse.org/uploads/special_report/33.pdf.

mass media; debates among "netizens" (wangmin) pertain to a variety of politically sensitive issues. The number of blog sites that mention keywords, such as "democracy" and political reform" or "freedom of speech" and "the Internet" has increased exponentially over the last five years. The organizers of social movements by members of the middle class in Shanghai and Xiamen or the ethno-nationalists in Tibet and Xinjiang have utilized blogs, emails, instant messaging, and cell phone text messages to rally support for causes domestically and internationally. These actions have made the CCP fear the power of new media.

The Chinese Propaganda Department, the Ministry of Information Industry, the Ministry of Public Security, and the Ministry of State Security have been at the front line of governmental efforts to control the Internet through the promulgation of restrictive laws, the use of computerized filters to eliminate content, and monitoring by the police. While the government has supported e-commerce and e-government, it has also trained party operatives to post content in online spaces, with the goal of "guiding public opinion."

In June 2009, the central government announced a regulation requiring personal computer manufacturers to install software that restricts Web access on all computers sold in the People's Republic. Called "Green Dam Youth Escort," the software aimed to plug leaks that have spouted in the Great Firewall of China, the moniker for country's elaborate system of Internet controls. "Green Dam" was designed to censor pornography and politically sensitive content, but could also be used to collect data on individual internet users.

Chinese media reported the software had been installed on more than 50 million machines. Complaints by Chinese users of the software, bloggers and Chinese media, however, were strident: The software, some argued, was a rushed job that had not been adequately tested and might make computers vulnerable to hackers; others expressed dismay about the invasion of privacy or worried they might have to pay user fees in the future. Pushback by the United States Commerce Department and the international business community may also have influenced the Ministry of Information Industry's June 30 decision to suspend mandatory installation of the software. At a July 1 celebration by activists who had opposed the software, artist and blogger Ai Weiwei called the government's change of heart a "victory for public opinion."[2]

Summary

In the words of David Shambaugh, "a daily battle is waged between the state and society over 'what is fit to know'. This contest reflects and constitutes a central contradiction in Chinese politics—between the needs of a rapidly modernizing economy and pluralizing society on the one hand and the desire by the party-state to maintain absolute political power on the other."[3] The outcome of this contest remains to be seen. In the near term, pressures are mounting for more information freedom. Chinese citizens, as resistance to Green Dam shows, have become more assertive in protecting the power they have gained from new communications technologies.

[2] Kathrin Hille, "Chinese Bloggers Hail Green Dam Victory," *Financial Times*, July 1, 2009.
[3] David Shambaugh, "China's Propaganda System: Institutions, Processes and Efficiency," *The China Journal*, No. 57, January 2007, p. 25.

Commercialization in China's media industry has created the imperative for media to please consumers in order to survive. Media that were once the mouthpieces of Mao Zedong's government now perform their propaganda role unwillingly. Commercial mass media would like to compete with blogs and social networking sites for the attention of the public. Party restrictions bar media from doing so, leaving journalists feeling as uncomfortable as a cat in a bag. Tight control over media content, in the context of internet freedom, contributes to disbelief, even cynicism toward state propaganda. The CCP controls the message in media reports, but this no longer means the public believes the message.