

Congressional-Executive Commission on China (CECC) Hearing:

Urging China's President Xi Jinping to Stop State-Sponsored Human Rights Abuses

September 18, 2015

Statement by Xiao Qiang

Founder and Chief Editor of CHINA DIGITAL TIMES

Adjunct Professor, School of Information, University of California, Berkeley

Mr. Chairman, Respected Members of the Commission,

My name is Xiao Qiang. I am the founder and chief editor of China Digital Times, a bilingual China news website. I am also an adjunct professor at the University of California, Berkeley School of Information, where my current research focuses on mapping political discourses in Chinese cyberspace, measuring state censorship and control of the Internet, and developing cloud-based technologies to break through that censorship. It is my privilege to testify in front of this commission again.

Mr. Chairman,

China has the world's largest number of Internet users, estimated at 641 million to date. After President Xi Jinping took power in 2012, he framed the Internet as a battlefield for ideological control and appointed himself head of a top-level Internet security committee. He also established the State Internet Information Office (renamed the Cyberspace Administration of China), and continues to intensify restrictions and controls on the Internet freedom.

In the past two and a half years, Xi's administration has not only expanded its crackdown on freedom of expression and freedom of the press, it has also launched a ferocious assault on civil society. These violations of fundamental rights and freedoms have been well documented by international human rights organizations.

For example, Freedom House's annual report "Freedom on the Net" details China's restrictions of Internet freedom by blocking and filtering access to international websites, censoring online content, and violating users' rights. I recommend Freedom House's excellent report to the Commission.

"World Press Freedom Index 2015," published by Paris-based Reporters Without Borders, ranks China 176th out of 180 countries.

China Digital Times closely follows the interplay of censorship, activism, and emerging public opinion on the Chinese Internet. In particular, we collect and translate many of the censorship directives the Party sends to state media and Internet companies. We also aggregate breaking news deemed "sensitive" by state censors.

During the last twelve years, the China Digital Times team has published over 2,600 such censorship directives, and using these directives has pieced together how the Chinese government restricts Internet freedom. Here are a few recent examples to illustrate these controls.

1. From September 8, 2015, on Tibet, issued by the Cyberspace Administration of China:

All websites may follow coverage of the 50th anniversary of the founding of the Tibet Autonomous Region. Please take care to tidy up negative and harmful information related to the news. You may close the comments section on major stories.

2. On September 7, 2015, the Chinese Communist Party's Central Propaganda Department issued a classified document, marked as notice number 320 for the year 2015. This document instructs state media to report positively on the economy. Here is one excerpt from this document:

The focus for the month of September will be strengthening economic propaganda and guiding public opinion, as well as overall planning for domestic- and foreign-facing propaganda and Internet propaganda, in order to take the next step in promoting the discourse on China's bright economic future and the superiority of

China's system, as well as stabilizing expectations and inspiring confidence.

In fact, both state and independent media have been pressured to keep economic reporting upbeat and to downplay the stock market crash last month as well as slumps earlier in the summer. A directive from August 25 requires that Chinese websites delete specific essays about the crash, while in June the State Administration of Press, Publication, Radio, Film, and Television instructed TV and radio stations to “rationally lead market expectations to prevent inappropriate reports from causing the market to spike or crash.”

The central government did not stop at issuing internal censorship and propaganda instructions. In August, Caijing reporter Wang Xiaolu confessed on CCTV to “causing panic and disorder” with a negative story on the stock market slump.

3. From September 3, 2015, concerning the military parade in Beijing, issued by the Central Propaganda Department:

Do not hype or comment on those high leaders of major Western countries who are not attending the September 3 military parade commemorating the 70th anniversary of the victory in the war against Japan.

4. On August 12, 2015, a chemical explosion in the port city of Tianjin left at least 173 dead and nearly 800 injured. China Digital Times collected a number of censorship instructions issued to state media and Internet companies regarding the accident, including the following from the Cyberspace Administration of China:

Standard sources must be used regarding the explosions in Tianjin's Tanggu Open Economic Zone. Use only copy from Xinhua and authoritative departments and media. Websites cannot privately gather information on the accident, and when publishing news cannot add individual interpretation without authorization. Do not make live broadcasts.

5. In July, almost 200 lawyers and activists were questioned or taken into custody. The state media calls this an operation against “conspirators” who are “colluding with petitioners to disturb social order and to reach their goals with ulterior motives.”

Here is one censorship directive issued by the Cyberspace Administration of China on July 14, 2015:

All websites must, without exception, use as the standard official and authoritative media reports with regards to the detention of trouble-making lawyers by the relevant departments. Personnel must take care to find and delete harmful information; do not repost news from non-standard sources.

In this case, the Chinese government is persecuting and prosecuting Chinese citizens, to quote H. R. 491, for “posting or transmitting peaceful political, religious, or ideological opinion or belief via the Internet.”

Mr. Chairman, Members of the Commission,

I also would like to recommend the remarkable report, “China’s Great Cannon,” published by Toronto University’s Citizen Lab. The Great Cannon is an attack tool used to launch distributed denial-of-service attacks on websites by intercepting massive amounts of web traffic and redirecting it to targeted websites. That is to say, it “weaponizes” unwitting Internet users from around the world in order to overwhelm the servers of the targeted sites.

The first deployment of the Great Cannon was in late March 2015, targeting two specific users of the San Francisco-based code sharing site Github: the New York Times’ Chinese mirror site, and the anti-censorship organisation GreatFire.org.

Based on this weapon’s network position across different Chinese Internet service providers and on similarities in its source code to the Great Firewall, the researchers at Citizen Lab and the International Computer Science Institute “believe there is compelling evidence that the Chinese government operates the GC [Great Cannon].”

In other words, the Chinese government is not only deliberately blocking, filtering, and censoring online information based on the expression of political, religious, or ideological opinion or belief within China; it is also using technology to disrupt Internet traffic and commercial infrastructure beyond its borders.

Mr. Chairman,

I want to thank the Commission for holding this important public hearing on human rights in China, days before the Chinese president Xi Jinping's first state visit to the United States.

I urge President Xi Jinping to stop his repressive policies and practices. The Chinese people want and deserve more access to information and the Internet, and greater freedom to express their views. Chinese people desire and demand greater protection of human rights in their political, social, economic, and cultural life.

I urge President Obama to engage President Xi on Internet freedom, press freedom, and freedom of expression in their meetings, not only raising concerns, but also insisting that future political and economic relationships be dependent on the Chinese government demonstrating improvements in upholding human rights.