

CECC Annual Report 2021

KEY FINDINGS

FREEDOM OF EXPRESSION

- Chinese Communist Party General Secretary and President Xi Jinping stressed the importance of influencing global public opinion this past year in advance of the Party’s centenary in July 2021 and in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. The Party and government leveraged an international media infrastructure to spread positive propaganda about the Party and reduce criticism of senior officials. News and research reports this past year also examined the widespread dissemination of government and Party propaganda and disinformation via social media platforms within China and internationally, including content related to COVID-19.
- Party control of China Global Television Network (CGTN)—a satellite arm of China’s Party- and state-run broadcaster China Central Television (CCTV)—and the lack of independent editorial responsibility over CGTN’s material were central to the decision in February 2021 by the Office of Communications (Ofcom), the United Kingdom television regulator, to revoke CGTN’s license-holder permission to broadcast in the U.K.
- Reporters Without Borders’ World Press Freedom Index continued to rank China among the worst countries for press freedom in the world—177 out of 180 for the third year in a row. Chinese laws and regulations restrict the space in which domestic journalists and media outlets may report the news, overseen by a system of censorship implemented by various Party and government agencies. The Cyberspace Administration of China has a leading role in regulatory efforts; this past year, it revised provisions on social media use that targeted citizen journalists and “self-media,” the proliferation of which the government has labeled “chaotic.”
- The government has expelled—or effectively expelled through visa renewal denials and harassment—at least 20 foreign journalists since August 2019. Those who remain, according to a BBC reporter, face “the grim reality of reporting from China,” which includes official harassment, physical obstruction, surveillance, and discrediting.
- Chinese authorities continued to arbitrarily detain, and in some cases try and sentence, Chinese citizens for speech and expression protected by international human rights standards. In December 2020, authorities in Shanghai municipality sentenced citizen journalist **Zhang Zhan** to four years in prison because of her video reports in February 2020 from Wuhan municipality, Hubei province, the epicenter of the COVID-19 outbreak. In another case, as part of a nationwide crackdown that started in 2019, authorities reportedly detained dozens of teenagers and individuals in their twenties in connection with the website Esu Wiki, on which a photo had been posted of Xi Mingze, daughter of Xi Jinping. Authorities sentenced 24 of them to prison terms, the longest of which was the 14-year sentence given to **Niu Tengyu**.

- The international non-governmental organization Freedom House ranked China as the “worst abuser of internet freedom for the sixth consecutive year” in its 2020 internet freedom assessment. This past year, the Chinese government counteracted the rising popularity of audio files and audio-only platforms that had created openings for speech and cross-border conversation. China’s first-ever five-year plan (2020–2025) for the “rule of law” likely will entail even more regulatory measures in information technology, which an observer suggested may be aimed at positioning China as a leading voice in international digital law rulemaking.

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Recommendations

Members of the U.S. Congress and Administration officials are encouraged to:

- Give greater public expression, including at the highest levels of the U.S. Government, to the issue of press freedom in China, condemning the harassment and detention of both domestic and foreign journalists; the denial, threat of denial, or delay of visas for foreign journalists; and the censorship of foreign media websites. Consistently link press freedom to U.S. interests, noting that censorship and restrictions on journalists and media websites prevent the free flow of information on issues of public concern, including public health and environmental crises, and food safety, and act as trade barriers for foreign companies attempting to access the Chinese market.
- Call on the International Olympic Committee (IOC) to make public the “assurances” on human rights it received from Chinese authorities as regards its role as host of the Winter Olympics in Beijing in February 2022. Given the Chinese government’s lack of compliance with its stated promises regarding free press when it hosted the Summer 2008 Olympics, and urge that the IOC work with international journalist associations to establish an independent mechanism to monitor journalists’ in-country and online access during the Games, and give real-time reports to the public on rights violations and censorship.
- Increase media literacy of U.S. citizens with regard to Chinese state-sponsored propaganda, censorship, and disinformation, including greater support and funding to graduate-level area studies programs and language study. Provide forums for scholars, civil society advocates, and journalists to discuss and disseminate “best practices” in Chinese media literacy, including developing online tools that protect the digital communications of students and scholars, and activists and journalists.
- Urge Chinese officials to end the unlawful detention and official harassment of Chinese rights advocates, lawyers, and journalists subjected to reprisal for exercising their right to freedom of expression. Call on officials to release or confirm the release of individuals detained or imprisoned for exercising freedom of expression, such as **Cai Wei, Chen Jieren, Chen Mei, Chen Qiushi, Ding Jiayi, Fang Bin, Geng Xiaonan,**

Huang Qi, Ke Chengbing, Li Xinde, Niu Tengyu, Wei Zhili, Xu Zhiyong, Zhang Zhan, Yang Zhengjun, and other political prisoners mentioned in this Report and documented in the Commission's Political Prisoner Database.

FREEDOM OF EXPRESSION

Party Control of the Media

AMPLIFYING THE PARTY'S STORY INTERNATIONALLY

In the months before the Chinese Communist Party's centenary in July 2021 and following a period of more than one year during which the Chinese government expelled (or effectively expelled) approximately 18 foreign journalists,¹ Chinese officials and Party- and state-run media outlets endorsed the late American journalist Edgar Snow (1905–1972) as a model foreign journalist.² Little was known internationally about the Party when Snow wrote about Mao Zedong and the Party in his 1937 book *Red Star Over China*, and the book's positive portrayals have been ascribed to the significant editorial input of Snow's Party liaisons and Mao himself.³ State media's multiple references to Edgar Snow nearly 85 years after *Red Star*'s publication correspond to what Freedom House media expert Sarah Cook has described as the Chinese leadership's strategic focus on “influenc[ing] public debate and media coverage about China outside of the country . . .”⁴ A June 2020 report from the International Federation of Journalists (IFJ) adds to Cook's research, documenting the Chinese government's efforts for at least a decade to influence the news about China through worldwide outreach to journalist associations and media outlets, content produced solely by or jointly with official Chinese outlets, study tours and training in China for members of national journalist associations, and the building of an external media infrastructure.⁵ In a follow-on study from May 2021 that looked at China's efforts to produce a worldwide story favorable to China about the COVID-19 pandemic, IFJ reported various ways in which this external media infrastructure had been activated.⁶ Sinopsis, a Prague-based project that analyzes political developments in China, previously reported on the Chinese government's outreach since 2014 to foreign media outlets and journalists in order to generate favorable publicity in the countries participating in China's Belt and Road Initiative.⁷ News and research reports this past year examined the widespread dissemination of government and Party propaganda and disinformation via social media platforms within China and internationally, including content related to COVID-19.⁸

Party General Secretary and Chinese President Xi Jinping's May 2021 speech to the Party Central Committee Political Bureau (Politburo) addressed international communications efforts, briefly mentioning stratagems that have been in place since the 18th Party Congress in October 2012 to present the Party's perspective on Chinese development.⁹ He urged redoubling the work to “strengthen the Chinese Communist Party's propaganda and its interpretation to make foreign peoples aware of the Chinese Communist Party's genuine struggle to achieve happiness and prosperity for the Chinese people, and to understand that the Chinese Communist Party is capable, Marxism is effective, and socialism with Chinese characteristics is good.”¹⁰ Xi spoke of making use of high-level experts, international forums, and mainstream foreign media outlets as a platform and channel for such international

communications.¹¹ Yet he omitted discussion of press freedom or the responsibility of journalists to report news accurately in the interests of the Chinese people and international community.¹²

U.K. Ofcom Revokes CGTN Broadcast License

Party control of China Global Television Network (CGTN)—a satellite arm of China’s Party- and state-run broadcaster China Central Television (CCTV)¹³—and the resulting lack of independent editorial responsibility over CGTN’s material were central to the decision in February 2021 by the Office of Communications (Ofcom), the United Kingdom television regulator, to revoke CGTN’s license-holder permission to broadcast in the U.K.¹⁴ Ofcom’s action was prompted by formal complaints that CGTN had aired forced confessions in politically motivated cases.¹⁵ Ofcom rejected a subsequent application to transfer the license to the China Global Television Network Corporation (CGTNC) on the basis that “. . . we consider that CGTNC would be disqualified from holding a licence, as it is controlled by a body which is ultimately controlled by the Chinese Communist Party.”¹⁶ In March 2021, Ofcom also fined CGTN for airing the confessions of Gui Minhai, a Swedish national, and Simon Cheng Man Kit, a Hong Kong resident who had worked at the British consulate in Hong Kong.¹⁷ With French broadcast regulations less restrictive, however, CGTN broadcasts continued to be accessible to U.K. viewers,¹⁸ including broadcasts that contained allegedly coerced statements.¹⁹ In March, for example, CGTN Français broadcast an interview with a young Uyghur girl in China—who was allegedly interviewed under duress and reportedly without obtaining her guardian’s consent—during which the broadcast accused her Australia-based father of abandonment.²⁰ [For more information about the plight of the Uyghur community in China, see Section IV—Xinjiang.]

REINFORCING PARTY GUIDANCE OVER NEWS MEDIA PLATFORMS AND JOURNALISTS

Reporters Without Borders’ 2021 World Press Freedom Index ranked China the fourth worst country in the world for press freedom (177 out of 180) for the third year in a row.²¹ Article 35 of China’s Constitution guarantees that Chinese citizens “enjoy . . . freedom of the press,” along with other expression-related rights,²² yet Chinese laws and regulations restrict the space in which domestic journalists and media outlets may exercise those freedoms.²³ The Chinese Communist Party historically designated the news media as its “mouthpiece,” providing the Party’s version of the news and “guiding” public opinion.²⁴ While a period of looser restrictions in the 1990s and 2000s in China saw the rise of more market-oriented news outlets²⁵ and influential investigative journalism,²⁶ Xi Jinping’s ascension to Communist Party General Secretary and Chinese President in October 2012 and March 2013, respectively, saw a renewed focus on journalists’ ideological alignment with and loyalty to Party principles²⁷ articulated in Xi’s 2016 comment that the media “must be surnamed Party.”²⁸

This past year, Chinese authorities continued to take regulatory measures to restrict social media accounts that provide news and public information.²⁹ Newly amended provisions for social media

account users, released in January 2021 by the Cyberspace Administration of China,³⁰ purportedly aim to curtail the spread of false information.³¹ Yet the provisions target the proliferation of citizen journalism³² and “self-media” (*zi meiti*)³³—the latter of which state media has described as “chaotic”³⁴—by requiring that users of independent social media accounts that publish news or public information have the relevant certification to allow them to report on the news.³⁵ David Bandurski, director of the Hong Kong-based China Media Project, observed that “[c]leansing the ‘self-media’ space, restraining sensitive information and dissenting views, is not sufficient on its own. The way must be cleared for the dominance of CCP-led public opinion.”³⁶ Domestic journalists’ use of social media has long been a focus of regulation; in 2014, news regulators placed restrictions on journalists’ and news organizations’ use of social media accounts, attempting to rein in journalists’ use of these accounts to publish reports and articles that had been censored or would have been censored by news organizations.³⁷ In January 2021, the National Press and Publication Administration added a review of journalist social media usage between December 2, 2019, and January 1, 2021, to journalists’ annual press certification.³⁸ The review thus created a basis to refuse certification to journalists who had used personal social media accounts for alleged unauthorized news reporting; it also “effectively extended official editorial controls from journalists’ places of employment to their personal accounts,” according to experts.³⁹

Official editorial controls in the form of censorship directives from the Cyberspace Administration of China, the Central Propaganda Department, and government entities⁴⁰ restrict coverage to “authoritative” content, such as information circulated by the state media agency Xinhua.⁴¹ Leaked directives from the past year, made available and translated by the U.S.-based web portal China Digital Times, demonstrate political sensitivities and a will to control issues that might foster criticism of the Party and government, such as the handling of the COVID-19 outbreak, economic recovery, implementation of rural policies that have led to home demolitions, and the U.S. presidential election.⁴²

Harassment and Criminal Detention of Citizen Journalists

China continued to detain the highest number of journalists in the world in 2020, according to the international advocacy group Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ).⁴³ Many of the detained Chinese journalists on CPJ’s list are considered “citizen journalists” in that some are non-professional or former journalists who document developments outside of the state- and Party-run news system.⁴⁴ Citizen journalists in China have challenged official narratives⁴⁵ and censorship by monitoring and reporting on the conditions of ethnic minority groups,⁴⁶ religious belief,⁴⁷ labor protests, occupational health,⁴⁸ and rights defense activities.⁴⁹ Some new and ongoing cases of concern from the Commission’s 2021 reporting year include the following:

- **For reporting on COVID-19.**⁵⁰ Authorities in Shanghai municipality sentenced **Zhang Zhan** on December 28, 2020, to four years in prison for “picking quarrels and provoking

trouble” in connection with videos she took in February 2020, which showed conditions in the COVID-19 epicenter of Wuhan municipality, Hubei province.⁵¹ Other cases of individuals detained for reporting on COVID-19 include **Fang Bin**, who was held in incommunicado detention, likely in Wuhan;⁵² **Chen Qiushi**, who was restricted to his parents’ home and environs in Qingdao municipality, Shandong province;⁵³ and **Chen Mei** and **Cai Wei**, who were tried on May 11, 2021, by the Chaoyang District People’s Court in Beijing municipality on the charge of “picking quarrels and provoking trouble.”⁵⁴

- **For reporting on anticorruption.** On January 7, 2021, the Pizhou Municipal People’s Court in Xuzhou municipality, Jiangsu province, sentenced **Li Xinde** to five years in prison and his son, **Li Chao**, to one year in prison on the charge of “illegal business activity,” in connection with Li Xinde’s watchdog journalism website China Public Opinion Supervision Net.⁵⁵

- **For reporting on a variety of rights defense activities.** Despite a need for medical parole due to advanced liver disease and other serious health conditions,⁵⁶ **Huang Qi**, founder of the human rights monitoring website 64 Tianwang,⁵⁷ continued to serve a 12-year sentence in Bazhong Prison in Bazhong municipality, Sichuan province, on the charges of “stealing, spying, purchasing, and illegally providing state secrets for overseas entities” and “intentionally disclosing state secrets.”⁵⁸ **Wei Zhili**, **Ke Chengbing**, and **Yang Zhengjun** of the website iLabour have been in pretrial detention since early 2019 on the charge of “picking quarrels and provoking trouble.”⁵⁹ Authorities harassed labor rights monitor **Lu Yuyu** following his release from prison in Yunnan province in June 2020, and forced him to leave Guangdong province, where he had been residing.⁶⁰

Foreign Journalists and “The Grim Reality of Reporting from China Today”

The Foreign Correspondents’ Club of China (FCCC) 2020 annual work survey and other reports during this past year highlighted the challenges facing independent foreign journalists and media outlets in providing accurate information on China from within China.⁶¹ In spite of these challenges, international correspondents, with their media outlets, were recognized for outstanding reporting on China this past year, including several recipients of and finalists for the Pulitzer Prize in Journalism.⁶² In addition to an unprecedented number of journalist expulsions in 2020, the FCCC documented visa restrictions and denials, digital and human surveillance of foreign correspondents, intimidation of Chinese nationals who work as news assistants for foreign media outlets, harassment of interviewees, and restrictions on access to areas where some ethnic minority groups reside.⁶³

- **Forced departures.** Starting with the effective expulsion of a Wall Street Journal reporter from China in August 2019,⁶⁴ the government has expelled or effectively expelled through visa controls⁶⁵ and harassment more than 20 foreign journal-

ists.⁶⁶ COVID-19 was cited as the reason for denial of entry or access for some reporters.⁶⁷ The Chinese government also justified some visa non-renewals for U.S. citizens as a retaliatory response to the treatment of Chinese journalists in the United States.⁶⁸ In some cases, foreign journalists pointed to worsening bilateral tensions with China as a factor in their departures,⁶⁹ such as the September 2020 departures of Australian journalists Bill Birtles and Mike Smith.⁷⁰ John Sudworth, a British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) reporter in China, departed China in March 2021 in connection with threats and harassment for his reporting, including coverage of the government's treatment of Uyghurs and other predominantly Muslim ethnic minority groups in the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region (XUAR).⁷¹ Veteran correspondents raised concerns that there may be fewer investigative reports from China⁷² and even an information "vacuum" as a result of these forced departures and assignments in China being curtailed by lack of work visas.⁷³

- **Discrediting.** Officials aggressively discredited foreign media organizations, reports, and individual journalists this past year.⁷⁴ At a daily press conference in March 2021, Ministry of Foreign Affairs spokesperson Wang Wenbin rejected the findings of the FCCC's 2020 working conditions survey by denying the legitimacy of the FCCC as an organization.⁷⁵ Government spokespersons accused the BBC of publishing "fake news" following a BBC report on the sexual abuse of Uyghur women in the XUAR.⁷⁶ Individual journalists were targeted for harassment,⁷⁷ including **Vicky Xiuzhong Xu**, a Chinese national based in Australia who has reported on rights abuses in the XUAR.⁷⁸

- **Banning broadcasts.** Not long after the U.K. government revoked the broadcasting license of China Global Television Network (CGTN), China's official broadcaster abroad, in February 2021, the Chinese government retaliated by banning BBC television broadcasts within China on the premise that BBC reports on repression in the XUAR violated broadcast rules on content.⁷⁹ (The BBC website and newscasts, however, were inaccessible in China for many years because of official censorship.⁸⁰)

- **Obstruction and assault.** John Sudworth of the BBC reported instances of being physically obstructed—by officials and unidentified individuals—while on assignment covering the COVID-19 pandemic⁸¹ and the treatment of Uyghurs in the XUAR,⁸² both issues that government and Party deem politically sensitive. Local authorities in the Inner Mongolia Autonomous Region briefly detained and assaulted a Los Angeles Times correspondent in September 2020 while she was reporting on a policy change that diminished the use of Mongolian language in primary and tertiary education.⁸³

- **Hong Kong.** Press freedom deteriorated dramatically this past year, largely in connection with the new Hong Kong National Security Law, which puts journalists at risk of criminal sanction regardless of the factual accuracy of their reporting.⁸⁴ The status of foreign journalists and media outlets in Hong

Kong, which was a longtime beacon of press freedom in Asia, also worsened.⁸⁵ The Hong Kong government refused to renew work visas of at least two foreign journalists⁸⁶ and delayed visas in other cases.⁸⁷ The New York Times moved its digital edition operations from Hong Kong to Seoul, South Korea, as a result of the changed conditions.⁸⁸ [For information on the prosecution of Apple Daily publisher Jimmy Lai and Hong Kong journalists and the intimidation of the public broadcaster RTHK, see the press freedom section in Section VII—Developments in Hong Kong and Macau.]

Cases of Detained Foreign Journalists and Chinese Nationals Working with Foreign Media Outlets During 2021 Reporting Year

- **CGTN announcer Cheng Lei.** Cheng, an Australian citizen who was primarily a business anchor for the Party-run broadcaster CGTN for eight years, was detained by authorities in China in August 2020.⁸⁹ In February 2021, authorities formally arrested her on suspicion of “stealing, spying, purchasing, and illegally supplying state secrets for overseas entities.”⁹⁰ Her detention took place in the broader context of deteriorating relations between China and Australia.⁹¹
- **Bloomberg news assistant Haze Fan.** In December 2020, authorities detained Haze Fan, a Chinese national who worked for Bloomberg News, for alleged national security crimes.⁹² Fan reportedly was a close friend of detained Australian reporter Cheng Lei.⁹³
- **Voice of America intern Tian Chuang.** To underscore security threats on China’s National Security Education Day, in mid-April 2021, state and Party media reported on the detention in 2020 of a journalism student from Hebei province named Tian Chuang, who reportedly had interned for Voice of America.⁹⁴

Using Chinese Law to Punish Free Speech and Other Challenges to Freedom of Expression

International standards on freedom of expression address concerns that governments may place excessive restrictions on speech. Article 19 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights⁹⁵—and its reiteration in a 2011 report by the then-Special Rapporteur on the promotion and protection of the right to freedom of opinion and expression—allows countries to impose certain restrictions or limitations on freedom of expression, if such restrictions are provided by law and are necessary for the purpose of respecting the “rights or reputations of others” or protecting national security, public order, public health, or morals.⁹⁶ In April 2020, as the COVID-19 pandemic was spreading around the world, the UN Special Rapporteur on the promotion and protection of the right to freedom of opinion and expression reiterated free speech principles, noting that “legality, necessity and proportionality apply across the board; they are not simply discarded in the context of efforts to address the public health threat of COVID-19.”⁹⁷

Chinese authorities continued to arbitrarily detain, and in some cases, try and sentence Chinese citizens for speech and expression protected by international human rights standards. A Chinese internet user with an online presence under the Twitter handle @SpeechFreedomCN built a Google spreadsheet that documented more than 2,000 cases of detention for alleged speech crimes from July 2013 through June 2021,⁹⁸ ranging from short-term administrative detentions of 2 to 15 days⁹⁹ to an 18-year sentence for businessman **Ren Zhiqiang**.¹⁰⁰ The speech for which authorities detained these individuals ranged from insulting traffic police,¹⁰¹ to support for an exiled businessman,¹⁰² to criticism of the Party,¹⁰³ among other content.¹⁰⁴ The internet user @SpeechFreedomCN found 660 cases of individuals detained between January 1, 2020, and June 5, 2021, for expressing opinions or sharing information about COVID-19.¹⁰⁵ Similarly, in the case of legal advocate **Xu Zhiyong**—detained by authorities in February 2020 after he tweeted criticism of Xi Jinping’s handling of COVID-19 and weeks after he participated in a private meeting to discuss civil society¹⁰⁶—the UN Working Group on Arbitrary Detention opined in March 2021 that,

The Working Group cannot help but notice that Mr. Xu’s political views and convictions are clearly at the centre of the present case[. . .]. Indeed, his human rights advocacy appears to be the sole reason for his arrest and detention.¹⁰⁷

With the broad shift to remote education due to the COVID-19 pandemic this past year, China studies academics outside China raised concerns about the possible criminal sanctions that their students in China might face if the students’ written work or online participation included discussion of topics or themes the Chinese government deems politically sensitive.¹⁰⁸ The Party and its history were especially sensitive in the months before the centenary of the Party’s founding; in April 2021, the Cybersecurity Administration of China established a hotline for individuals to report instances of “historical nihilism”¹⁰⁹ and in May authorized the deletion of more than 2 million social media posts alleged to “harm” official history.¹¹⁰ The New York-based non-governmental organization Scholars at Risk reported in its 2020 annual report on academic freedom throughout the world that Chinese authorities detained a Japanese scholar for about two months in China for allegedly collecting historical materials.¹¹¹ The scholar, an expert in 20th-century Chinese history, was in China at the invitation of the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences.¹¹² [For more information on repression this past year of foreign academics and researchers, see Section II—Human Rights Violations in the U.S. and Globally and Section IV—Xinjiang.]

In addition to the cases already mentioned in this chapter and other sections of the 2021 Annual Report, other notable speech cases reported this past year included the following:

- In September 2020, public security officials in Haidian district, Beijing municipality, criminally detained wife and husband **Geng Xiaonan** and **Qin Zhen**, owners of a publishing firm, on suspicion of “illegal business activity.”¹¹³ **Xu Zhangrun**, a prominent Party critic and recently fired

Tsinghua University law professor whom authorities detained from July 7 to 12, 2020,¹¹⁴ for allegedly “consorting with prostitutes,”¹¹⁵ claimed that authorities had detained the couple for Geng’s public support of Xu after his detention.¹¹⁶ Geng had stated that the official allegation against Xu was “just the kind of vile slander that they use against someone they want to silence . . .”¹¹⁷ In February 2021, the Haidian District People’s Court sentenced Geng to three years in prison, and sentenced Qin to two years and six months in prison, suspended for three years.¹¹⁸

- In a nationwide crackdown starting in 2019, authorities reportedly detained dozens of teenagers and individuals in their twenties in connection with the website Esu Wiki,¹¹⁹ on which a photo had been posted of Xi Mingze, daughter of Chinese President and Party General Secretary Xi Jinping.¹²⁰ Authorities sentenced 24 of them to prison terms, the longest of which was a 14-year sentence given to **Niu Tengyu**,¹²¹ a coder who had provided technical support to the website.¹²² Niu reported that public security officials subjected him to severe torture, including sexual abuse, while in detention.¹²³

Selected Internet and Social Media Developments

According to the China Internet Network Information Center (CNNIC), there were 989 million internet users in China as of December 2020,¹²⁴ 986 million of whom accessed the internet from mobile phones.¹²⁵ As of March 2021, WeChat, a Chinese instant messaging platform, reportedly had more than 1.2 billion monthly active users throughout the world.¹²⁶ Sina Weibo, a domestic microblogging platform similar to Twitter, reportedly reached 530 million monthly active users worldwide in March 2021,¹²⁷ of whom 230 million are registered in China.¹²⁸ The international non-governmental organization Freedom House ranked China as the “worst abuser of internet freedom for the sixth consecutive year” in its 2020 internet freedom assessment.¹²⁹

This past year, the Chinese government counteracted the rising popularity of audio files and audio-only platforms that had created openings for speech and cross-border conversation, by requiring the removal of applications (apps) from app stores. In June 2020, Apple removed the apps for two podcasts with content that Chinese authorities deemed to be politically sensitive.¹³⁰ Apple also blocked and removed Signal, an encrypted chat and messaging app that was popular among rights defenders, from its mobile store in China in March 2021.¹³¹ On February 8, 2021, authorities blocked access to the Clubhouse app¹³² not long after Clubhouse users from several countries reportedly held discussions about the Chinese government’s repressive measures against Uyghurs and other ethnic minority groups in the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region.¹³³ The Tuber browser app, which allowed limited access to U.S. social media sites like YouTube, Facebook, and Twitter, appeared and was removed the same day from app stores in October 2020.¹³⁴ [For more information on the role of Apple and Chinese companies in implementing censorship on behalf of the government and Party, see Section II—Business and Human Rights.]

INTERNET GOVERNANCE IN CHINA AND INTERNATIONALLY

A February 2021 essay in the Party's theoretical journal *Seeking Truth* by the head of the Cyberspace Administration of China, Zhuang Rongwen, emphasized the Party's leadership over cybersecurity and information space by citing Party General Secretary and President Xi Jinping's statements regarding strict adherence to the Party's management of the internet.¹³⁵ Zhuang also highlighted the Party's ambition to shape global internet governance norms¹³⁶ and promote a concept of cyber sovereignty, which a China cybersecurity expert defined as "the state hold[ing] ultimate authority in the digital space."¹³⁷ In March 2021, the National People's Congress adopted the 14th Five-Year Plan for National Economic and Social Development and the Outline of Long-Term Goals for 2035 (14th Five-Year Plan),¹³⁸ which gives priority to scientific and technological innovation and self-reliance.¹³⁹ State media outlet Xinhua reported that the 14th Five-Year Plan proposes "to promote the establishment of a global internet governance system that is multilateral, democratic and transparent . . .,"¹⁴⁰ a plan that implies a limited role for non-governmental stakeholders like industry and civil society organizations.¹⁴¹ One observer suggested, moreover, that China's first-ever five-year plan (2020–2025) for the "rule of law" likely will entail even more regulatory measures in information technology,¹⁴² and potentially positions China as a leading voice in international digital law rulemaking.¹⁴³ [For more information on legal developments regarding data privacy and surveillance, see Section III—Institutions of Democratic Governance.]

THE TURN AGAINST BIG TECH

Chinese authorities launched a campaign against Chinese information technology companies with antitrust and other regulations in fall 2020. In November, the State Administration for Market Regulation published guidelines that addressed anti-competitive behavior in the internet sector,¹⁴⁴ compelling compliance from companies on conduct ranging from monopolistic practices¹⁴⁵ to a failure to adhere to Party policy aims.¹⁴⁶ The campaign reportedly stems from government and Party concern over the increasing power and influence of e-commerce and technology companies,¹⁴⁷ including the expansion of these companies into finance and banking,¹⁴⁸ and their access to users' private data.¹⁴⁹ One of the most visible targets of the government's campaign was Alibaba, which authorities fined US\$2.8 billion in April 2021, for allegedly violating antitrust regulations¹⁵⁰ after canceling the initial public offering of its affiliate Ant Group in November 2020.¹⁵¹ News reports, moreover, linked Alibaba founder and former CEO Jack Ma's criticism of China's financial regulatory sector in October 2020 to his months' long "disappearance" from the public at the end of 2020.¹⁵²

Notes to Section II—Freedom of Expression

¹Foreign Correspondents' Club of China, *Track, Trace, Expel: Reporting on China Amid a Pandemic*, March 2021, 1–2.

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