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Press Freedom

My topic today is about China's press freedom. I believe most of you already have an idea about the state of China's press freedom. I think most people sitting here will agree if I say a Chinese journalist does not have as much freedom as an American journalist. But I don't know how many of you will agree with me if I say most Chinese journalists have a large amount of freedom in reporting and writing.

When news about harassment and prosecution of Chinese journalists come out to the western newspaper continuously, it might be counter-intuitive to say that Chinese journalists have more freedom in reporting and writing than many westerners believe. Here I want to make two points because both of them are crucial components of the state of China's press freedom: first, the increasing diversity and freedom of the Chinese media; the second self-censorship. I will focus on the increasing diversity and freedom of Chinese media in my presentation but would like to talk more about censorship later on.

The development of China's press freedom, I believe, can be generalized as "two steps forward, one step back". The steps-forward area is often the area that falls out of the western world's radar screen: the socioeconomic development. If you look back 15-20 years, the reporting on the economic and social problems in China is much more liberal and sophisticated now. I still remember I wrote the first article criticizing the Chinese Government's corruption problem in 1998 immediately after Zhu Rongji took power. However, it was unthinkable in 1993 or even 1994 to write such a story. Family planning policy is one of the MOST holy policies from 1975 to 1998. However, I was encouraged by my own editor to write a story about the policy debate on whether family planning policy should go on. I can give you more examples later if you want.

The recent change is in the reporting on political policy, the area that is often one step forward and half-step-back area. Recently, you might see a widely published article lashing out on North Korea and advocating why China should join the US to pressure North Korea for China's own security. Another example is a report on a study by Chinese scholars on why there is no direct causal relation between educational level and the success of direct election mechanism.

Chinese journalists are not faced with the to-be-or-not-to-be questions such as "should we speak truth or not" or "shall I challenge the censorship or not?" Most of Chinese journalists, including me three years ago, are just running around the news conference or follow a lead that seems interesting, or talking to scholars and trying to contact officials. There is no evil mastermind sitting in my office, watching every step I take or every word that I write. For the 85-90% of my work, I write about whatever I want to write. Chinese journalists who cover economic news probably have more freedom since I am working for op-ed page.

Push the envelop

Many journalists are trying to push the limit of "political correctness" and successful in doing so in many cases. Mao Yushi; Dong Yuyu

Freedom created for structural reasons:

Media outlets directly under the propaganda watchdogs suffer from strictest censorship. Media outlets

under the provincial propaganda authority will have more leeway to move around if the local propaganda authorities are more flexible. Beijing Youth Daily for example is under the Propaganda office of the Youth League, which is a part of the Beijing Municipal Government. Therefore, the Central Propaganda Ministry has to go through layers of bureaucracies to send warnings to them. Take another example: Nanfang Zhoumo (Southern Weekend) is under the Propaganda Branch of the Guangdong Provincial Government, which is kind of independent in economic policy and even domestic politics anyway.

Creating freedom in writing:

Avoid direct confrontations and avoid advocating the slogans that immediately draw fire on you but use small details and facts to communicate what you mean. Avoid putting the criticism as your own judgment. You can write or structure your ideas in the way that is less inflammable and therefore unnoticed by the censorship. To read a story on China Daily, start from the last five paragraphs. Chinese readers are smart readers. They can read between lines.

Countermeasures: "There is a policy from above, and then there is countermeasure from the bottom."

When one newspaper is closed down or purged, the major set of editors and reporters will be transferred to another newspaper. Where there are needs, there are deeds. Nanfang Zhoumo, when purged, turned into 21st Century Herald. Internet and commercialization are two factors to help these activities.

I want to emphasize that I am not suggesting that Chinese journalists are as free as the American journalists in writings and reporting. We are far from that. However, I am trying to explain that it is difficult to generalize whether Chinese journalists have or don't have press freedom in a black-and-white manner. As a transitional society inevitably heading for liberalization and social plurality, China should be treated with a more nuanced approach and therefore the targeting policy from the outside world to help promote the press freedom will see better results. One immediate policy implication for the western countries is to help educate, train and empower Chinese journalists, especially those with more free spirit but sidelined, instead of criticizing the lack of press freedom in China.

Probably will stop here!! But if still with time, will talk about the following things.

Self-censorship

I have to say the "evil mastermind", if there is any, is a shadow sitting in my own minds or the minds of every Chinese journalist: that is self-censorship. Self-censorship is the major form of media control in China. Self-censorship in Chinese media is like in the US you should be careful not to say anything "politically incorrect". Self-censoring yourself in China as well is not to say something politically incorrect, here politically in the literal sense. The censorship system helps enforce the self-censorship by giving guidance in advance and making examples, punishing those that crossed the line too far.

Censorship takes effect in recruiting journalists and journalists' promotions.

Two distinctive groups of journalists: in-system (follow the rules, obedient to their superiors and always get the best opportunities) and those living on the edge of the system. You cannot write what you are not allowed to write; but, as a journalist, you can often refuse to write what you don't want to write; Case: Falun Gong. The latter group of journalists is often regarded as "trouble-makers" in this profession. Media organizations want to keep them because their articles are more marketable than others'. However, these people won't have much chance to get major promotions. In China, promotions are related to salary,

bonus, housing, training opportunities, good beats, interesting topics and in one word other people's respect. This group of journalists are often discouraged, pushed around and ripped off good opportunities. Two ways for these people: go out of the system and work for the private sectors or go abroad; swallow their pride and join the "mainstream".

Practical problems for Chinese journalists: monopoly of the government over information:

Personal relations with these ministries are also very important. Guanxi plays in Chinese journalism as well. Alternative source: scholars, more open-minded and have less restraint to speak. How much you can rely on a non-official source, it depends on which area you are talking about. The ownership of China's information was still very much held in the hands of the government, statistics, market research and opinion polls are very much controlled. In many cases, only the government control the information, for example, when a policy is to be let out and what the policy might look like. Since China is not a democracy, govt agendas and policy debates are more or less held in black box. Journalists therefore depend on government for information. So going back to alternative source, if in economic news, you have much more other resources you can rely on, more critics that like to jump out to make comment. But you talk about for example arms control, you very much rely on the foreign ministry and Moftec for any information since the think tanks in this field rely on the government as well.

Govt officials took journalists, especially journalists from the mainstream media groups, as "their own people". They would talk a lot, I guess even a lot more than American government officials would do, to the reporters. On the other hand, journalists in turn will watch for the ends of these officials, sifting through things provocative or sensitive, which might bring troubles to this official. In many cases, journalists know much more about the story behind than they appear to, i.e., the articles published. That is the rule of the game. Chen Xiao was put onto the blacklist of Moftec. Nobody talks to him ever. You could write one provocative story or two, but then you lost your jobs afterwards. You have to do something else.