

Statement Presented to the Congressional-Executive Committee on China

By Zhang Huchen
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My name is Huchen Zhang, I'm a senior editor at the China Branch of Voice of America. I'm very happy to be here this afternoon to talk about the state of the Chinese press in the wake of the SARS outbreak. Before I begin, I'd like to tell you a little bit about myself. I attended the Journalism School of the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences from 1982 to 1984. From 1984 to 1990, I worked as a reporter at the "Central News Desk" of the Overseas Department of the Official Xinhua News Agency, covering the National People's Congress, the Chinese parliament, and a number of government ministries. I came to the United States to study in 1990 and have been working for the Voice of America since 1991.

At the height of the SARS outbreak last April, the Political Bureau of the Chinese Communist Party held an emergency meeting in Beijing to discuss how to deal with the unprecedented epidemic. Among the decisions made at the meeting was to ask the media to report truthfully and accurately the magnitude and the seriousness of the outbreak. It was a reversal of the earlier practice of covering up the disease at both the central and local levels. Two high-ranking officials—the public health minister and the mayor of Beijing were sacked for the cover-up.

Drastic changes were seen overnight. Numbers of new cases and deaths were published daily in the newspapers and on radio and TV. Press conferences held by the new mayor of Beijing were carried live on China's Central Television Station (CCTV). Mr. Hu Jintao, China's new president and Party chief, and Mr. Wen Jiabao, the new premier, were also seen on CCTV visiting hospitals, shopping centers and homes in the cities of Guangzhou, Shenzhen and Beijing, and saying how worried and concerned they were about the outbreak.

Many political observers and analysts of the Chinese press believed that this might be a harbinger for a new beginning for the Chinese press.

However, as the truth of the outbreak reached the Chinese public, people in large cities, especially in Beijing, became panicky. A large number of people, not just those working and living in Beijing temporarily, but also Beijing residents, fled the city in a matter of days, bringing the risk of spreading the disease to other parts of the country, especially the countryside.

This must have made the Chinese leaders realize that in a country that has never seen freedom of the press, the truth of a major epidemic such as the outbreak of SARS might be a little too much for its citizenry to handle. Another drastic change was seen on the Chinese press. Instead of reporting new areas of contamination and public reaction, the focus was now shifted to reporting the "heroic deeds" of the public health workers, and what measures the government was taking to keep the virus under control.

The SARS epidemic came to an abrupt end at the onset of summer. As the SARS virus evaporated, so did the hope for any meaningful change on the part of the Chinese press.

Gone also was the hope that the SARS outbreak would lead to any meaningful political reform and a new era of openness. Soon after the World Health Organization lifted the travel warning to Beijing and other major cities, Party officials in charge of propaganda began to rein in those whom they believed had gone too far in reporting the outbreak. Several newspapers were ordered to close or were warned for

interviewing a military doctor who wrote to the western media to reveal the true states of the SARS outbreak, for reporting a major corruption case in Shanghai or discussing any “sensitive” topics, such as political reform and Tibet independence. People who sent short messaging texts on cell phones were also prosecuted.

A telling example of the increased control of the Chinese media was the massive demonstration in Hong Kong on July 1 against the proposed anti-subversion legislation. After the demonstration broke out, there was a blackout on the part of the Chinese media. Official news media, including CCTV, did not report the mass rally at all. TV signals from Hong Kong to the mainland containing the demonstration were cut off immediately. It was only 12 days later that the China Daily, the official English newspaper, mentioned the demonstration in a commentary. Callers to VOA shows commented that they would have been kept totally in the dark about the July 1 and subsequent demonstrations had it not been for the reporting of VOA and other international radio stations.

The ever increasing control of the Chinese media did not mean that people stopped talking about political reform, corruption, the revision of the Chinese constitution and similar sensitive topics. A number of publications carried articles on these issues, and a conference was held on June 19-20 in the coastal city of Qingdao to debate constitutional reform.

This led the Propaganda Department of the Communist Party to take more action. In August, the department ordered party organizations, research institutes and universities to stop all conferences and suppress all essays on political reform, revisions to the constitution and the 1989 Tiananmen Square crackdown. The department also instructed China’s news media not to report on these “three unmentionables”. An associate of Mr. Cao Siyuan, the organizer of the June conference and a leading advocate of political reform, told VOA that Mr. Cao was under a lot of pressure from the authorities and it would be “inconvenient” for him to make any more comments on revising the constitution.

This month, the government held another meeting on “consolidating and rectifying” newspapers and periodicals. Decisions made at the meeting included closing several hundred local papers and magazines and upholding the Communist Party’s guidance in news reporting.

At the same time, broadcasting of VOA and other international radio stations continues to be jammed and overseas websites continue to be blocked.

However, we can not say that there has been no change for the better in the Chinese news media. One “bright spot” is the reporting of accidents. For many years, natural disasters and man-made calamities were deemed “negative news”. Reporting of such negative news, it was believed, would only bring shame to the leadership of the Communist Party and socialist system. One lesson the Chinese leaders must have learned from the SARS outbreak, I think, is that diseases, natural disasters and accidents happen to any country, regardless of its political system. At the height of the SARS outbreak, the Chinese official media reported a major submarine accident. After SARS, we have seen more and more reporting on food poisoning, coal mine explosion and other accidents. These reports even lead to the imprisonment of a number of officials who were accused of being responsible for the accidents or covering up the accidents.

Now how do we explain the back and forth in the battle for control of the Chinese media? To me, the measures that were taken at the height of the SARS outbreak were merely measures of necessity. China was under a great deal of criticism from the international community, especially the WHO. The Chinese citizens had also lost faith in the Chinese media. They would rather rely on the grapevine, that is, word of mouth, short texts on their cell phones and the internet, for news of SARS. The central leadership took those measures to repair its badly tarnished international image and to restore some faith in its legitimacy.

Had the SARS outbreak lasted a bit longer, it might have built some momentum for press reform. As it so happened, the SARS virus evaporated at the onset of hot weather, and the party officials congratulated themselves on their good luck, and went on doing things the old way.

What about the future of the Chinese press? I see two forces at work: one is the conscientious effort on the part of Chinese journalists to break the control of the government. Journalists continue to report on sensitive political issues either out of their sense of social responsibility or because of the forces of market economy. As more and more newspapers and other news organizations fight for their survival in an ever-growing market economy, they feel the need to increase their market share by reporting on topics people are concerned about. The other force is the Communist Party's desire to polish its image and consolidate its rule. Reporting of large scale corruption and systematic failure would only weaken its rule.

In any case, the fight for freedom of the press cannot be won overnight. After all, it will take a Chinese Gorbachev, not a virus, to bring down the iron rule on the Chinese press.