# Media in China

An Irreversible Transition?

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The role of the mass media in a communist state has always been the one where it is expected to be the mouthpiece of the ruling party. (Gulyás, 2001, p. 74-81) Media freedom does not exist in any communist structure. The same was true for the Chinese media as well. For the large part of history after the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) established its rule, the Chinese mass media played the role of the mouthpiece of the party. It was used as an instrument to extend the views and opinions of the party leadership, with respect to both domestic as well as foreign policy. Therefore, there was no space for private media houses as all media was owned and controlled by the CCP. Media was used primarily to foster the need for propaganda.

The people read and listened to the mass media as a means to get information regarding the developments of the party policy, Media's role as understood in a democratic sense, as a space for voicing people's perspectives was not there in China as media was used as a one way tool and the Party hierarchy, from village upwards, communicated between the grassroots of the Chinese society and the top echelons of leadership of the CCP.

All this underwent major transformation after Deng Xiaoping came to power. The opening up of the Chinese economy was one of the most landmark developments in the Chinese history. The steps taken by him transformed the whole Chinese economy and help China move out of its underdeveloped state. These efforts have had multiple impacts on the Chinese society. The opening up of the economy has transformed the way the party and the society interacted. The more the Chinese economy opened the more this balance of the state-society relations. The changes which have occurred have totally changed the face of the party control. The mass media has become more responsible in its behaviour and has shifted its allegiance from the party to the people. Some of the examples of this transformation was the role of the mass media during the SARS epidemic and the Zhejiang train crash. It can also be stated that this transformation will continue in process and the mass media may become an independent force in domestic politics in China.

## I
## DEVELOPMENTS IN THE CHINESE MEDIA

The opening up of the Chinese economy was the first important catalyst in the process of transformation in the role of the Chinese mass media. As has been argued by Yu Huang and Xu Yu, "the process of post-Mao Chinese model of economic reform is different in many ways. By adopting this model of economic liberalization Deng Xiaoping adopted an open door policy, which has sowed the seeds of destruction of the one part authoritarian rule in China. The

outcome of state destruction is an unintended consequence of the open door policy.

Over the years one has witnessed that there has been a consistent reduction in the Chinese communist power from society, as a consequence of this radical socio-economic reform movement". (Huang and Xu, 1997, p. 317)

In the recent years social pressure for further fundamental changes within society and state apparatus has gained momentum. However, since this transition is still unfolding, the outcome can only be predicted and debated upon. Every aspect of the People's Republic of China (PRC) has undergone change but one of the most prominent transformations within China has occurred in the way in which the Chinese mass media functions today. On the other hand Schell has argues that "more freedom, in the economic realm and greater control, in the political realm has created a cognitive dissonance and a dialectical tension that makes changes within Chinese media both exciting and uncertain. It is possible that China's increasingly market driven media will ultimately collide with its resistant Leninist state in a politically tectonic way. China's system of media control, which was originally, adopted from Stalinist Russia in the 1950s works through "Party branches", located in every media outlet." (Schelle, 1998, p. 35-36)

In the first decade of reforms, the number of registered newspapers was less than 200 but by the year 2005 their number had increased to 2200. In contrast there were only 69 newspapers in the entire country in the year 1979. (Shirk, 2011, p. 7) There has been an almost equal leap in the other sectors of the media – television, radio, magazine etc. Apart from these, the introduction of internet has brought the media closer to the

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rest of the world.

1980s were remarkable because it was in this period that the debate over Press Reform deepened in China. A number of scholars have highlighted the intensity of the debate during this period and what were the factors which lead to the changes. According to Huang and Xu, "the phase witnessed an increase in the debates around concepts such as socialist freedom of the press, institutional transformation of the media, and supervision by public opinion, open media systems and political transparency." (Huang and Xu, 1997, p. 313-333) As has been argued by Lee, "opinion polling developed rapidly, media decentralization accelerated and media professionalism was progressively more honored and practiced." (Lee. 2003) On the other hand, Jernow states that the "cry for a more free and independent press in China had never been so explicit as during this phase, which culminated in the 1989 Tiananmen Square massacre when thousands of Chinese journalists shouted slogans such as 'We want to tell the truth', 'Don't force us to lie' and 'We want press freedom'". (Jernow 1993 in Huang and Xu 1997, p. 318)

The time which followed is regarded as the time when the media went back to the old

Communist system. The media which had just faced a violent suppression at the hands of the authorities became less vocal. However, at the same time, mass media underwent structural changes on management front as has been argued by Bandurki and Gang "though the period after 1992 can be described as one of commercialization and structural transformation. The commercialization of the Chinese media further gained momentum after 2000. This was primarily because of the fact that the Chinese government opened the domestic media market for the international newspapers and media houses". (Gang, and Bandurski, in Shirk 2011, p. 38-39)

As the economic reforms strengthened, the government substantially withdrew the subsidies that the state run media enjoyed before. This development is a key factor in commercializing the Chinese mass media. As the resources dwindled, media houses were forced to look for alternative options for earning. The most prominent amongst this was the use of advertising. Advertising was seen as a taboo until then. But this belief underwent change and the first advertisement under the CCP happened in 1979 on a radio channel. (Hong, 1994, p. 328) And the first advertisement which was aired on Chinese television was in Shanghai

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in 1979. The monetary importance of revenue can be gauged from the fact that from 1979 to 1992, advertising revenue for Shanghai TV alone hiked from 0.49 million RMB to 170 million RMB. The advertising industry moved on to become the fastest growing industry within a decade. (Weber, 2002, p. 61)

The Chinese mass media realized that it had to work harder to gain the benefits of advertising they had to get more people to watch and read their stories. As a result, the major part of the media moved away from propaganda and started to look for stories which would appeal to the masses. This was the first time when the Chinese mass media got involved in analytical journalism. From just reporting what the government wanted them to do they started to carve out a niche for themselves by attempting to report what the people wanted to hear.

Though there are no fully private owned media outlets in China as the primary ownership is the government. The level of control of the government appears to be weakening. This is happening as the journalists and the editors have learnt to look for ways and means to dodge the government commands and report what they think affects the people; an act which does not have a precedent in the Chinese history.

One of the major requirements of media organizations is that they must support party and government positions and simultaneously also become modern industrial enterprises capable of competing. This appears to be the obvious outcome of the implicit endorsement of external investment in the media. In addition, technological and market forces are making the place and role of Chinese media more complex. New technological changes increase the individualization and the

privatization of media use by creating new communication networks which often crosscut the older boundaries of place, culture, class and political organization and tend to undermine rather than sustain traditional political ties. At the same time the government is tightening its control over the media in terms of the content focus and quality.

According to Huang and Yu "what is critically significant in the evolution of Chinese media in the last two decades is that it exhibited a dual nature. On the one hand, tremendous and remarkable changes have been witnessed as the media developed in a more pluralist, market oriented and more democratic direction." On the other hand, it has been subjected to CCP's control to the extent that it can be described as its "mouth, eyes and ears". (Huang, and Xu. 1997, p. 332 -333) As a result, media in China today is moving like a pendulum between two extremes. One is to play the role of the mouthpiece and official propaganda organ of the Party and Government and the other is the desire to become the representative voice of the masses. Thus, the Chinese media today is in a major occupational flux.

The Chinese media is constantly in a transformational situation where it is working towards defining its new characteristics. In the past, the Chinese media has shown that this flux is quite obvious with respect to a number of incidents. Some of the most prominent examples will be the SARS outbreak and the Sichuan earthquake. In both these cases the Chinese media initially followed the government's stand, but with passage of time realized that this is not in favor of the people and thus shifted their stand to reporting by defying the government's command, something which is not expected in a command economy. During the crisis, the media was asked to promote positive

*Today the Chinese media is working towards becoming the voice of the people and is looking forward to fairer reporting incidents and developments which directly affect the masses. Thus, one can say that they are reversing the traditional understanding of media in a communist state.*

propaganda. Nevertheless the Chinese government went back to its controlling act after the effects of the SARS and the Earthquake were controlled. The media control structures were used in full force.

## II
## GLOBALIZATION AND CHINESE MEDIA

Globalization has transformed the way the Chinese media functions today. The introduction of new technologies like television, mobile telephone, and internet have transformed the structure of the Chinese mass media. With the advent of globalization there has also been an upsurge in the zeal of nationalism. The state has become more and more concerned about the nationalistic fervour and the PRC has consistently relied on nationalism in order to boost its control. The new technologies have however made the flow of information faster and easier, and thus making it difficult for the government to exercise absolute control. As has been aptly stated by Schell, "The flow of media content across China's borders is significant more because it offers Chinese audiences more resources for constructing arguments and identities than because of seductive "Western values" woven into imported media". (Schell, in Dennis and Snyder 1998 p. 35-36) The diffusion of media

business models particularly media firms dependent on advertising revenues, has given rise to a commercial culture that is often apolitical but which may nonetheless undermine the traditional relationship between political authorities and the public.

The introduction of internet has had the most dramatic impact on the Chinese media. The number of people using the internet in China is approximately around 485 million. The number will increase further if we add Hong Kong to count. The Chinese government has realized the level of impact this change will have on its control of the politics and has thus very thoughtfully introduced a number of filtering points. The government is working towards controlling the level of information which flows through the internet. No denying that the CCP has been quite successful in the maintaining the controls, with the passage of time the people have figured out ways and method to surpass this 'great Chinese firewall'. According to Hatamato, "The Chinese government relies on strict restrictions of the internet and media to help filter the type of content that is available to the country's citizens".

Keeping in mind the attraction of the Chinese market, a number of international

internet companies had agreed to help the government to control the flow of information. The recent fallout between Google and the CCP is the most prominent example of how the Chinese government has been working towards controlling the flow of information. The fact that the Chinese people are one of the largest internet users in the world has also led to the development of a number of domestic internet portals which help the people be up to date with developments.

Internet has also made the flow of international developments fast and easy. The Chinese people have more access to international developments then they ever had in the past. The developments like the Jasmine Revolution have reached the people in spite of the CCP working too hard to control the information through the internet. The Chinese government is also scared of the fact that if more information reached the people there might be demand for political freedom and change which will be a difficult outcome for the party-state. The most prominent motive of the government to prevent major outflow of information to the people is to prevent any 'large scale distribution of information that may lead to collective action'. (Qiang, 2011, p. 209)  In spite of such control by the government there has been a major increase in the level of 'online activism', especially between 2000 and 2010. (Yang, 2009, p. 227)

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Another peculiar characteristic of the Chinese media search portals has been the fact that most of them have interactive chatting option. Even though the government still has filters which stop the people from searching for sensitive topics like Tibet, Tiananmen etc. the people have looked for ways and means to overlook this blockade. This is also the reason why today the government encourages the people to express their grievances through the internet

and other means. Today the government has realized the impact of internet on people and on public opinion and thus has become more accommodative of the views which the people express through the internet channels, using it mainly as a safety valve for understanding and managing the angers and frustrations of urban China. In the same spirit, in 2007 President Hu Jintao stated that the party should try an "actively and creatively nurture a healthy online culture" which meets the demand of the Chinese people.

Given the ongoing government controls of political content, it is till far from clear whether market forces in China are liberating the media to become a voice of free expression, or whether they are simply liberating within the confines of the Leninist State to make more money. However, the latest developments have shown that the changes within the media structure have complicated the relationship between the party and the society. To a very large extend the media today is working towards providing analytical reporting in contrasts to just mouthing the party dictates. At least when it comes to the social aspect and to the areas which affect the day to day life of the people, the media in China today has decided to be more responsible and play the role of the people's voice. This has also come in affect as the government has realized that there is a need to incorporate the views and opinions of the people.

This change has also been a result of the fact that with the opening up there has been a rise in the number of new communication technologies and instruments which are available to the people. Even if the government attempts to control and restrict the outflow of news in the print media, it generally makes way to the people through the internet or mobile phones. This was readily visible in the case of the High speed

*Even if the government attempts to control and restrict the outflow of news in the print media, it generally makes way to the people through the internet or mobile phones. This was readily visible in the case of the High speed rail accident which took place in the Chinese Zhejiang province in July 2011.*

rail accident which took place in the Chinese Zhejiang province on July 23, 2011. In spite of the initial attempts to cover the cause and the impact of the accident, the news did get out and the government had to announce for open and fair investigation and even now there are sporadic reports on the progress of the investigation. The primary actor which has been active in forcing the government to secede to the demands of the people has been the internet. The information regarding the accident was posted with such speed that the Chinese government was not able to hide the truth as pictures of the accident spread through blogs. This kind of public engagement has been unprecedented in the history Chinese media. Certainly, taking lead from this instance, in future media will be called for more active duty in reporting negligence on part of public officials. These changes are not occurring only in the domestic sphere now, but have major effects in the foreign policy arena as well.

The confidence of the Chinese people in the capability and credibility of the CCP to rule is one of the most important requirements for the continuance of domestic stability in China. The CCP understands that in an era when the legitimacy to rule has moved away from communist ideology, it is only the

public opinion which is helping it stay in power. Any development which can swing this public opinion in the negative is perceived as a threat. As a result, the CCP works too hard in attempting to satisfy the demands of the people vis-à-vis the nationalistic feelings. Such uproars are most visible with respect to Japan and the United States. Even though at times the CCP might want to not appear to be too tough in its stance towards foreign policy the people's opinion pushes it to take such stand. Today the party understands that it cannot completely afford to disregard the demands of the people. The online chat houses and the blogs are such outlet which the government tries to monitor with the aim to understand the existing 'mood' of the masses.

Investigative Journalism.
The most prominent example in this section is the story of Wang Keqin. Wang started working as a propaganda journalist at the age of twenty. According to Tania Branigan, "by 2001 he was "China's most expensive reporter": not a reference to his salary or lifestyle – but to the mammoth price put on his head for exposing illegal dealings in local financial markets. Soon afterwards another report enraged local officials and cost him his job". The story of Wang provides a clear

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understanding of the condition of investigative journalism in China.

However, over the past few years a number of stories of corruption, bad governance etc. have been reported, the journalists have usually paid a heavy price for this. Though this highlights the fact that today the journalist in China are ready to undertake measures, even though it jeopardizes their jobs, to report what concerns the people.

One of the most prominent cases with this respect has been the killing of Sun Zhigang. According to China Daily, "Sun Zhigang, an employee at the Guangzhou Daqi Garment Company from Wuhan, capital city of Central China's Hubei Province, was beaten to death by eight patients at a penitentiary hospital just hours after being arrested as a vagrant for not carrying ID. A total of 12 people guilty of beating young man Sun Zhigang to death, received death penalties or terms of imprisonment ranging from three years to life from Guangzhou Municipal Intermediate People's Court." This was made possible only after the media picked up the story and reported this killing.

According to China Digital Times, "reporters from Nanfang Dushi Bao (Southern Metropolis News), an aggressive daily run by groundbreaking editor Cheng Yizhong, soon discovered an official autopsy report that found Sun had been beaten to death in custody. Though well aware that a story on the autopsy would infuriate local officials, Cheng gave the go-ahead to publish it anyway. The article touched off a national scandal that led to important government reforms. But true to the nature of contemporary Chinese society "where emerging free-market forces regularly collide with authoritarian traditions" it also landed Cheng and three colleagues in prison".

## III
## CONCLUSION: IS 'NEW MEDIA' GIVING RISE TO A 'PUBLIC SPHERE' IN CHINA?

These changes lead to the debate to whether a public sphere now does exists in China. As the Chinese have always attempted to put 'Chinese characteristics' to things, one can say that today the public sphere exists primarily in the virtual sphere. The basic understanding of the term 'Public Sphere' as defined by Jurgen Habermas "connoted an ideal of unrestricted rational discussion of public matter" which in turn helps in the formation of public opinion. (Fraser, 1990, p. 56-80)

With an increase in the number of publications and the decline in the monopoly of the CCP sponsored publications, there has been more free space for discussion and analytical reporting. In addition to this, introduction of internet, besides bringing more people in the ambit of information technology, has transformed the speed with which information is available to the Chinese people. Though, it would be farfetched to conclude that the debates in the 'public' domain are absolutely free and uncontrolled. The CCP still has a very strong hold over the free spaces and the freedom to discuss things is still controlled by the party. The government decides to which extent and what issues it can leave it free for the people to have discussion on.

However, as discussed above, there have been major developments towards where the people are attempting to push issues which affect their day to day lives. This is a welcome change from a total propaganda system. Meanwhile the journalists are also becoming increasingly skilful at agenda setting for public discourse while striking a balance between political survival and their professional ideals. (Gang, and Bandurski in Shirk 2011, p. 71) According to Bandurski

and Hala, "the vantage point of party leaders, "supervision by public opinion" consists of using the media as a tool to expose the corruption and other crimes at the local and regional level. But with the development of more commercial and professional media "supervision of public opinion" became associated with media's right to monitor officials on public's behalf and thus came closer to investigative journalism and other forms of reporting, which came closer to the freedom of speech". (Bandurski and Hala, 2010, p. 31) On the other hand Fong Tak-ho argues that, "over the past two years, a few righteous people who have stepped up to the plate to confront the party's pressure and suppression of dissenting voices have successfully employed the internet as their most powerful tool to unearth the truth covered up by authorities, help provide justice to the wrongly accused, and put the guilty in jail".

This process has been further enhanced with the help of internet and other new communication technologies. For the Chinese people today it is becoming easier to discuss and debate over issues which were considered taboo earlier, like accountability of lower rank officials. Incidents where the local officials make it difficult for news to be reported in one province, it generally finds audience in other provinces. This with the help of internet finally gets to be known nationally.

No doubt that the journalists know that the government only lets them pursue news which directly do not question the sanctity of authority of the central leadership. This is still sacrosanct and outside the purview of media debates. As a result the media now has two reporting authorities 'the people and the party'. (Bandurski and Hala 2010, p. 43) According to Paul Mooney, "Chinese intellectuals and journalists warn that this

should not be mistaken as a move toward true freedom of expression. They say that Hu Jintao and Wen Jiabao will not sanction any reform that will undermine the party's - and their own – authority".

This new space to debate and discuss some aspects of the society and politics can be regarded as a form of 'public sphere' in China. This space is also becoming powerful as the CCP now makes and effort to understand what the debates are in this domain. They also want to accommodate the demands of the people while they formulate policies.

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