



Vivekananda International Foundation

# Xi's Tightening Control over the Media

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## Media in China

It has been forty years since the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) began its economic reforms but its tussles with 21<sup>st</sup> century Chinese society continues, decreasing poverty but increasing income disparity, with its dual track policy making it possible for both to circumvent each other's limits. The Chinese media too has successfully invented novel ways to bypass the authority of the state since 1978.

However, after Xi Jinping came to power in 2012, this balance has shifted heavily in favour of the government. Xi has adopted a host of new methods to control and monitor the media in China. The primary objective of this effort is to bring the media in China (traditional, electronic and social) under the complete control and command of the CCP. As Xi gears up to exercise complete control over the government and the military, he is simultaneously putting in place structures to contain the wave of criticism and public opinion which has gained foothold in the relatively 'free' space which the media in China has been enjoying since the 1990's.

Xi believes that media control is very crucial to his overall plan for maintaining control over the party. He also realises the importance of monitoring the emerging discontent amongst the people, most visible on social media. It is social media where the Chinese people have been most active in expressing dissatisfaction and criticism of the Xi government's various failings in the social sector.

The traditional media has also followed a similar path, with increased reporting of 'mass incidents' in China, meaning public dissent. In the last few years, the media has become a tool in the hands of Chinese society, an apparatus which the Chinese people employ deftly in order to get their grievances heard. When people have any complaints against the CCP, reporting by the media and investigative journalism has so far been the only option available to the common Chinese people to voice their angst. From what one reads on various media platforms, one can even say with some confidence, the media in China has been functioning as an ad hoc 'legal' body because the judiciary and the law are tightly controlled by the CCP.

## Media's Role

The accepted role of media in China, as in any other Communist state, is one where it is expected to follow the Party line. The media in China is controlled and monitored by the CCP. The Communist understanding of the role of the media is as the 'watchdog and mouthpiece' of the Party.

Before the Deng Xiaoping-backed economic reforms, the media was fully under the command of the Party and it was also the beneficiary of high governmental subsidy. The reporting was always of what the Party wanted to publish. Media was used primarily to foster the need for propaganda.<sup>1</sup> The CCP had established the Department of Propaganda as early as in the year 1921.<sup>2</sup> The print media was used as a means to inform the people about the policies and ideas adopted by the CCP.

With liberalisation of the economy, things began to change for the Chinese media. The Chinese economy became increasingly competitive. The government abolished the subsidies to pliant media and allowed advertising. This forced the Chinese media houses to look for newer ways to earn revenues, which was to publish what the advertiser said and all that the people wanted to read, thus began the media's compulsion to publish things outside the dictates of the CCP. This was also the phase when there was a major increase in the number of publications in China. According to some estimates, the number of press outlets in China rose from 200 in 1978 to around 1,600 in 1988.

A further push towards change came with the introduction of internet and cell phones. China has been on the internet intermittently since May 1989 and on a permanent basis since 20 April 1994. These new technologies changed the way Chinese people gained information in the 90's. The newer technologies made the inflow of information faster and thus made it challenging for the CCP to control the flow of information. This also changed the role of the media in China from being merely a mouthpiece of the Party to becoming an active space for debate and argument. The technologies also gave birth to new actors in the media sector.

The introduction of internet also accelerated the changes underway in China. The major impetus for the introduction of internet in China was the lure of economic benefits. However, the impact it has had on the political domain is what the CCP was not prepared for. A major example was the 1989 Tiananmen Square protests. The protestors were mainly journalists and students. Some of the media houses also participated in critiquing the government and organising the protests.

Even though the Chinese government employs some of the most sophisticated means to control the amount of information available to its people, in the last few years this task has proved to be very difficult. Today, the Chinese people have more ways of accessing information of their choice than ever before. One needs to, however, understand that even though the Chinese media 'appeared' to be becoming free at the turn of the century, it was still not allowed to report on the government and on politics. David Bandurski<sup>1</sup> has very aptly explained the status of media in China, saying, 'Press control is a part of political life in China. [It] is also real and immediate'.<sup>3</sup>

China has witnessed a consistent rise in the number of internet users in the past few decades. There has also been a rise in the number of people who shop, play and do business

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i David Bandurski is analyst and editor at the University of Hong Kong's China Media Project.

online. The number of people using videos online in China is also increasing consistently. Thus, the internet has come to play a crucial role in affecting the way people think and react to various events and developments. It's a two-way communication bandwidth, China's government uses the internet to disseminate information, its society uses it to access information. As of July 2017, there were 751 million internet users in China, a figure which increased by 19.92 million in the first half of 2018. China's internet penetration rate has reached 54.3%. Since 2004, there has been a surge in the social media and online platforms in China.

Internet also helps in bringing news from the world over and global information faster to the people of China. In China the internet is also used by the masses to gain information and news which the Chinese government censors. Thus, it is no surprise that the government in China has always been worried about the way the internet can affect its rule and control over the media in general. The Chinese censorship method has, as a result, evolved and constantly proved to be one of the most 'pervasive and sophisticated systems'.<sup>4</sup>

One should not, however, conclude that the media in China has been free to report on political developments, policies or stances since the advent of the net. Any criticism of the central leadership and national policies are still out of the reach of the media. Most of the new freedom and space has so far been exploited by the media to air criticism and protests with regard to the living standards and pollution-related issues. To some extent, the media also managed to touch corruption within the CCP, but these were limited to exposure of lower level politicians, party functionaries and provincial leaders.

Since 2012, things have been changing rapidly under the leadership of Xi Jinping as the wings of its flightless bird are being further clipped.

## **Xi Jinping and the Media**

Under Xi Jinping, the media landscape in China has witnessed ever tighter control and monitoring; clearly indicating Xi's hard hand approach will be the future policy of the CCP towards the Chinese. As a first hint, the local media came in full support of the party and Xi Jinping when the abolition of term limit on the President's rule and the changes made to the Chinese Constitution was announced.<sup>ii</sup> The government has also plans to distribute around 300,000 televisions to families in poorer regions of China. They assert that this will help in '... better disseminate Xi Jinping's Thought on Socialism with Chinese Characteristics for a New Era'.<sup>5</sup>

In the words of Alec Ash<sup>iii</sup>, 'There are deeply worrying trends in top-level Chinese politics. Since becoming president four years ago, President Xi has consolidated power, cracked down on civil society, and stifled dissent in an alarming reversal of what observers

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ii At the National People's Congress (NPC) concluded in March 2018, China voted for the abolition of the two five year term limits for the Presidential and Vice-Presidential term.

iii Alec Ash is a writer and editor living in Beijing.

both inside and out of China had hoped was a trend of gradual reform since the Beijing Olympics in 2008<sup>6</sup>. Immediately after the abolition of term limit, a few words and phrases were banned from Chinese search engines that were deemed as subtle criticism or satire. According to a list published by the BBC, words like, ‘proclaiming oneself an emperor’, ‘I don't agree’, ‘re-election’ and ‘migration’ were not available online.<sup>7</sup> References to ‘Winnie the Pooh’, ‘proclaimed king’ and ‘I object’ were also blocked,<sup>8</sup> thus, creating a new list of terms which are now blocked on Chinese internet services.

How uncomfortable the government is with the notion of ‘free’ discussion and ‘open’ debate is illuminated in the discussion on ideology in China’s 13<sup>th</sup> Five Year Plan. The plan asserts that, ‘Strengthen ideological and cultural initiatives online. Cultivate a positive culture on the internet and “cleanse” its environment’.<sup>9</sup> It is clear that the government under Xi Jinping is consciously working towards the creation of ‘Internet with Chinese Characteristics’.

## Enhanced Control

Noticeably, Xi has undertaken a number of steps to control the media and get it fully into the folds of the CCP. The party has marked out consistent steps to reverse the trend of what was seen as excessive ‘freedom’ of the media in China. The general trend today is towards a more government-controlled and propaganda-driven media. Towards this end, in February 2016, Xi visited the CCTV headquarters and expressed his assertion that the media should be loyal to the Party. Xi said, ‘They (media) must love the party, protect the party, and closely align themselves with the party leadership in thought, politics and action’.<sup>10</sup>

In yet another drastic step to control the media, the government has created a new media outlet called the ‘Voice of China’ for which Xi has recounted 14,000 employees from China Central Television (CCTV), China National Radio and China Radio International, purely for propaganda purposes. The other media outlets such as the *Xinhua* and the *People’s Daily* are expected to directly answer to the Propaganda Department.<sup>11</sup> This is a very clear move in the direction of getting the media to play the role of the watch dog of the Party. It will tell the people what all the party disapproves of. It will display all that the party approves of and the media will have to follow the Party line. Any transgressions will be punished harshly. According to Deng Yuwen,<sup>iv</sup> ‘The censorship has become much more severe. Journalists who don't toe the party line now receive harsher treatment. When they do actually report, they [must] only put out good news, and reduce so-called ‘negative energy’ or whatever is critical. Control of the press is at an unprecedented level’.<sup>12</sup> The tussle between the idea of internet freedom and censorship peaked around 2014 with Google and the government at loggerheads. While discussing the ‘gmail’ ban in 2014, *Global Times* had argued, ‘We only need to have faith that China has its own logic in terms of internet policy and it is made and runs in accordance with the country’s fundamental interests’.<sup>13</sup>

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*iv* Deng Yuwen is a political commentator and international relations scholar.

The wide extent to which the government in China monitors the internet is apparent from the fact that prior to the Tiananmen Anniversary (June 4) every year, the government bans and blocks a number of searches which may be directed at finding any information regarding the Incident. Even after three decades, this media monitoring and control goes on in full swing in China with the censoring of any information about the Tiananmen Square protests. No surprise that words like June 4, number 4 and 6, Tiananmen Square etc. are all blocked every June in China.

In an effort to control and monitor what is written on the internet, the government in China has proper guidelines which set the direction of internet posts and discussions. According to these guidelines, people regarded as spreading any kind of rumours can be arrested.<sup>14</sup> Another way government has extended its control over the media under Xi was to ban the use of puns (word play) in 2014 by the local media. The government argued that use of ‘puns’ can harm Chinese culture and affect children adversely.<sup>15</sup> While describing the ongoing developments in Chinese society, Kerry Brown argues that the, “[Chinese society today is a] society laden with double meanings”.<sup>16</sup>

In 2015 February, the government banned the web documentary, *Under the Dome*. It dealt with the increasing air pollution in China.<sup>17</sup> Another important development which has affected the space of media reporting is the passing of the ‘Anti-Terrorism Law’ in December 2015. Under this law, the government will be able to monitor private conversations in China in the guise of monitoring terrorism related activities. It also requires the internet and telecommunication companies to help the Chinese government in decryption of data. It restricts the media’s freedom of reporting of any of these operations in the name of peace, security and stability.<sup>18</sup> This will, naturally, increasingly help the Xi government in monitoring Xinjiang and Tibet and all that is happening there.

In an effort to control the internet, China passed the Cyber Security Law which came in effect on June 1, 2017. Since its adoption, the Law has become a major cause of concern for foreign investors in China as well as the people. Even though the law pushes for safeguarding the personal data of people, the government can order goods and service-providing companies to share data and information at any point it deems necessary. Even after almost a year after the passing of the Law, the process to obtain approval for cyber security in China is still not clear.<sup>19</sup> To add to the Cyber Security Law, the government passed another rule in January 2018 called the Public Internet Cyber Security Threat Monitoring and Mitigation Measures. According to some reports, ‘The overarching policy plan, if successful, could one day provide the CPC with a wealth of active intelligence about hackers, data breaches, software vulnerabilities and other digital threats’.<sup>20</sup> A report by Recorded Future asserts that, ‘The law grants the China Information Technology Evaluation Center (CNITSEC), an office in the Ministry of State Security (MSS), the power to request source code and other intellectual

property of tech suppliers operating in the country. Information gleaned might easily be exploited by CNITSEC in furtherance of its intelligence operations'.<sup>21</sup>

In another step, the government has decided to abolish China's State Administration of Press, Publication, Radio, Film and Television (SAPPRFT) which was established in 2013. The government now plans to establish a new agency which will be directly under the control of the Chinese State Council. A report by *Xinhua* says:<sup>22</sup>

“SAPPRFT will be replaced by a new state radio and television administration, said a document released Tuesday regarding reform of the cabinet. The proposed body will be more firmly under the thumb of the Communist Party. It will be responsible for drafting policies and measures for radio and television management and their implementation, coordinating development of broadcasting undertakings and industries, promoting institutional reform in the sectors, importing radio and television programs and facilitating the sectors to go global.”

There are also reports that young journalists are giving up their careers as they feel there is no future in continuing as journalist in China. The excessive control today is killing the profession. In addition to financial constraints faced by newspapers because of digital media, Xi's heavy-handedness is a major cause. Editors have also been worried about the increasing control. The media is pressured to print the top headline about Xi Jinping while the second has to be about Li Keqiang.<sup>23</sup> In 2017 China had jailed around 41 journalists.<sup>24</sup> In March 2016 journalist Jia Jia was arrested from the airport because he had criticised Xi Jinping online. This news was confirmed by his lawyer.<sup>25</sup> The situation has become more intense as in March 2018 the Chinese government detained relatives of journalists working and reporting about the Xinjiang region.<sup>26</sup>

Another ambitious plan of the government under Xi's leadership is the launch of 'Internet Plus'. Under this, the government plans to assign scores to each and every Chinese citizen depending on the way they behave in their professional and personnel lives. The scores one gains will then decide whether a person is eligible for loans, better housing etc. The basic argument to describe this is that the government, with the help of data gathered and monitored, will be using the carrot and stick method by 'rewarding good behaviour and punishing bad behaviour'.<sup>27</sup> However, a similar plan launched in Suining County in 2010 was withdrawn because of people's protests.<sup>28</sup> The government, however, went ahead with such plans and has also created a shocking blacklist of 9.59 million people in October 2013.<sup>29</sup>

So far, the most prominent step by Xi Jinping in gaining full control over the internet landscape in China is the blocking of virtual private networks (VPNs). The ban restricts access to non-Chinese internet portals such as Gmail and Facebook. This has also hampered the business and education of a lot of Chinese people. As observed by *Firstpost*, 'the crackdown

reflects Xi's notion of "internet sovereignty," or Beijing's absolute right to control what people can do and see online'.<sup>30</sup>

## Foreign Media under Xi Jinping

Since Xi came to power, the working conditions of the foreign journalists have been deteriorating. In the last five years there have been a number of instances when a foreign journalist was not issued visa or granted travel access. The 'no renewal of visa' for the French journalist Ursula Gauthier reporting about Xinjiang is a sure sign of how the government under Xi is going to treat foreign journalists.<sup>31</sup>

In a report published by the Foreign Correspondents' Club of China (FCCC) in 2014, 'work conditions had worsened or stayed the same compared to 2013'.<sup>32</sup> Recently the government questioned for an hour Heike Schmidt, a journalist working for the French Foreign Ministry-funded outlet, *Radio France Internationale*, after she finished conducting an interview on the recent constitutional reforms.<sup>33</sup> In a more recent report, the FCCC says: Our survey results provide strong evidence to suggest that, from an already very low baseline, reporting conditions are getting worse.<sup>34</sup>

David Bandurski notes, in China 'Controls on new media are much stricter now than we have seen at any point since the dawn of the internet'.<sup>35</sup> Freedom House, a US state-funded non-profit organisation reports, 'China has been awarded the dubious title of the country with the world's worst internet freedoms, taking top spot for the third consecutive year over the likes of Syria and Iran'.<sup>36</sup>

Such steps only strengthen the argument that the media's freedom space under Xi is shrinking at a rapid pace. Earlier the foreign journalists still managed to enjoy some freedom in reporting but now it appears that Xi's iron fist is extending to them as well.

## Conclusion

In sum, one can say that pre-1978, the media in China was 'completely' under the control of the central leadership. After the opening up, till the 1989 Tiananmen Square events, the media did enjoy some level of freedom in reporting (especially with regard to economic and social issues which had very little to no political consequences) from China. However, after the Tiananmen Square events, till the introduction of internet, the media went back to facing very rigid controls. The introduction of internet provided a fresh lease of life to the media landscape. Chinese journalists' innovated ways to dodge the control of the Party and report on issues they deemed important. Again, before and during the 2008 Beijing Olympics, the government used stricter control on the media in order to portray a positive image of China to the world.

In the past three decades of reforms, the media in China has enjoyed some prominent phases of being relatively 'free'. It was quite vibrant and active during the time of Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS, 2003), the tinted-milk issue (2008), the Zhejiang Railway Accident (2011) and the Sichuan Earthquake (2008). However, things have started to look distinctively bleak once again, media-wise.

The hope for increased freedom and reform in the media landscape has receded after Xi Jinping gained the reigns of the CCP. There is a clear indication that Xi has not been happy with the way the Chinese media enjoyed 'freedom' under Hu Jintao. Now there are distinct signs of the government polices moving back to the pre-Deng Xiaoping era. The focus on maintaining 'peace and stability' of the society and to counter any criticism against the Party is pushing Xi Jinping to adopt newer ways to control the media and public opinion.

In addition to the Great Chinese Firewall (the Chinese internet space is highly controlled and the government has blocked a number of websites like Facebook, Gmail, Twitter etc.) and the 50 cents-Army (this is a group of people which is employed by the CCP to write positive things about the CCP and the government and help counter any kind of criticism), the government under Xi is looking for newer ways of control and dictate. With time, the government in China has become more sensitive to criticism, as the number of words that are banned from searches are only increasing. One would have expected that with more control and with longer time in power, the CCP will be more comfortable with its position. However, the reverse appears to be true as of now.

China today is moving towards becoming a completely totalitarian and authoritarian country which is finding newer ways to control and monitor its people. With the number of internet users in China increasing every year and the world getting increasingly interconnected, this task will also prove very challenging.

One pertinent point to consider is how the government will control the flow of information through people travelling in and out of China? Even though the government may successfully monitor the flow of information through media channels inside China on the net, the information and ideas flowing into China with people will prove highly difficult to regulate.

The desire to control and monitor also stems from the fact that the Party is increasingly worried about the ways the internet and media can be used by the people to express dissent and anger against its rule. That is not going to be always easy, given the widening scope of globalisation and the communication revolution underway; both actively embraced by China. As to how China grapples with innovative technology will be keenly watched by the rest of the world.

## End Notes:

1. Propaganda, simply put, is the manipulation of public opinion. It is generally carried out through media that is capable of reaching a large amount of people and effectively persuading them for or against a cause. (For information visit, 'What is Propaganda?' At <http://library.thinkquest.org/C0111500/whatis.htm> Accessed on August 20, 2011).
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3. David Bandurski, 'Jousting with Monsters: Journalists in a Rapidly Changing China' in *China in and Beyond the Headlines*, Ed., Timothy B. Weston and Lionel M. Jensen, Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc, 2012, pp. 29.
4. Sheng, Ding (2012), *The Great Firewall of China": Internet Censorship and Chinese Foreign Policy*, Ashgate Research Companion, Ashgate Press, UK, 2012.
5. "China hands out free TVs to beam propaganda into poorest regions" by Neil Connor, *The Telegraph*, February 22, 2018, at <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2018/02/22/china-hands-free-tvs-beam-propaganda-poorest-regions/>, (Accessed on March 26, 2018).
6. "How the rise of a liberal, social media-savvy generation is changing Chinese society" by Alec Ash, *Vox News*, March 26, 2017, at <https://www.vox.com/world/2017/3/26/15035702/china-social-media-youth-society-culture-politics-government>, (accessed April 2, 2018).
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11. "Orwellian move: China's President-for-life Xi Jinping now controls all media, 'scores' citizens" by Jamie Seidel, *News Corp Australia Network*, March 26, 2018, at <http://www.news.com.au/world/orwellian-move-chinas-presidentforlife-xi-jinping-now-controls-all-media-scores-citizens/news-story/8e6c4f0cc0282487d23d24832ad4c026>, (Accessed March 26, 2018).
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14. "China issues new internet rules that include jail time" *BBC News*, September 9, 2013, at <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-china-23990674> (Accessed April 2, 2018).
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  29. "Inside China's "social credit" system, which blacklists citizens" By Jennifer Pak, Market Place, February 13, 2018, at <https://www.marketplace.org/2018/02/13/world/social-credit-score-china-blacklisted>, (Accessed March 27, 2018).
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  35. "China has launched another crackdown on the internet — but it's different this time" by Cheang Ming and Saheli Roy Choudhury, CNBC, October 26, 2017, at <https://www.cnbc.com/2017/10/26/china-internet-censorship-new-crackdowns-and-rules-are-here-to-stay.html> (Accessed March 27, 2018).
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The Vivekananda International Foundation is an independent non-partisan institution that conducts research and analysis on domestic and international issues, and offers a platform for dialogue and conflict resolution. Some of India's leading practitioners from the fields of security, military, diplomacy, government, academia and media have come together to generate ideas and stimulate action on national security issues.

The defining feature of VIF lies in its provision of core institutional support which enables the organisation to be flexible in its approach and proactive in changing circumstances, with a long-term focus on India's strategic, developmental and civilisational interests. The VIF aims to channelise fresh insights and decades of experience harnessed from its faculty into fostering actionable ideas for the nation's stakeholders.

Since its inception, VIF has pursued quality research and scholarship and made efforts to highlight issues in governance, and strengthen national security. This is being actualised through numerous activities like seminars, round tables, interactive dialogues, Vimarsh (public discourse), conferences and briefings. The publications of VIF form lasting deliverables of VIF's aspiration to impact on the prevailing discourse on issues concerning India's national interest.



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