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THE GREAT LEAP BACKWARDS OF JOURNALISM IN CHINA



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FOREWORD



Christophe Deloire
Secretary General

A frantic race in the wrong direction

At the start of the millennium, in the euphoria of an unprecedented economic boom, and without a doubt due to increased freedoms granted by President Hu Jintao and the Communist Party, the Chinese media opened up, as much as they could, to investigation and exchange of ideas. With in-depth investigations, particularly on corruption and public health scandals, Chinese journalists not only gave their compatriots the means to understand their country's development, but also to apply pressure on the state apparatus for it to address certain flaws in the system and correct some injustices.

Of course, the core of the social and political system remained completely opaque, but one could hope that little by little, by capillarity, the scope of journalistic work could extend to every subject, including the most essential. One could imagine a centripetal spiral, because in China freedoms must be conquered from the periphery to the centre.

President Xi Jinping, in power since 2013, has put a brutal end to this partial opening and restored a media culture worthy of the Maoist era, in which freely accessing information has become a crime and to provide information an even greater crime. China, the world's largest prison for journalists, ranks 177th out of 180 in the 2021 RSF World Press Freedom Index, just two places above North Korea, a country in which journalism is synonymous with state propaganda.

The renewal of Chinese journalists' press credentials is now subject to a test of knowledge of the president's “Thought” and an examination of their footprint on social networks. In its frenzy of control, the regime is even considering banning private media in the near future. It is a nightmare. The repression no longer spares Hong Kong, once a champion of press freedom, where a growing number of arrests are now conducted in the name of national security.

This “great leap backwards” of journalism in China is all the more terrifying given that the regime has immense financial and technological resources to achieve its goals. Its sophisticated internet censorship system, the “Great Firewall”, keeps China's one billion internet users further away from the world while an army of censors scrutinises private messaging, looking for alleged subversive content. In the near future, the ubiquity of surveillance technologies based on facial recognition, artificial intelligence, and social credit threatens to make the confidentiality of journalists' sources illusory.

In a previous report, published in 2019 and entitled China's Pursuit of a New World Media Order, we demonstrated how Beijing spends lavishly to put an end to the role of journalism as a counter-power and make it a tool at the service of state propaganda. The Belt and Road Initiative, an international economic development project launched by China that involves 139 countries (two-thirds of the world's population), provides all opportunities for the regime to achieve this ambition.

If China continues this frantic race backwards, Chinese citizens may lose hope to one day see press freedom established in their country, and the Beijing regime may succeed in imposing its anti-model domestically and abroad...

But it is also possible that information control finally harms the system itself and, by preventing its own reforms, renders the mobilisation of the masses ineffective through propaganda. Overall, it is possible that journalistic investigations conducted by Chinese and foreign journalists lift an increasingly wide corner of the veil.

Yes, it is possible.



© Safeguard Defenders

A growing number of obstacles to information

• The Great Firewall

The term "Great Firewall" refers to the Chinese internet censorship apparatus, comparing its role as a computer firewall to the ancient Great Wall of China. The system, which allows the blocking of sites deemed undesirable and the monitoring of exchanges, is increasingly difficult to circumvent.

• The internet's prying eyes

Chinese online discussion groups are closely monitored, and their administrators are criminally responsible for their content. The social network WeChat, for its part, has become the police's Trojan horse: The private conversations it hosts, unencrypted, can be viewed by authorities without official reason and are commonly used as evidence in trials.

• The regime's army of trolls

The "50 Cent Army", composed of amateur propagandists paid half a Chinese yuan (US \$0.02) per post, floods the internet with pro-regime comments, while a battalion of trolls, called the "Little Pinks", harasses those who criticise the government on domestic and foreign social networks. This setup was recently strengthened by a squad of foreign influencers whose accounts are sometimes fake and whose mission is to denigrate the work of Western journalists.

• The "Residential Surveillance at a Designated Location"

This regime of detention with a deliberately misleading name was instituted in 2012 under the pretext of combatting terrorism and corruption and does not refer to simple home custody, but rather to solitary confinement in the regime's "black prisons". This cruel treatment, which violates the right to legal defence and is often accompanied by acts of torture, is regularly used to physically and mentally break down independent journalists.

• The National Security Law (Hong Kong)

The National Security Law was adopted on 30th June 2020 by the Beijing regime to end the pro-democracy protests in Hong Kong. This deliberately vague and catch-all text has since served as a pretext for the repression of independent voices in the name of the fight against "terrorism", "secession", "sedition", and "colluding with foreign forces", four crimes punishable by the death penalty in mainland China and frequently used against journalists.

• A "tea time" invitation

The deceptively innocuous "tea time" invitation from officials in charge of censorship or propaganda is a proven method of intimidating Chinese journalists and foreign correspondents. This meeting, during which journalists are lectured in a relatively cordial manner, often acts as the last warning before an arrest or expulsion.

• The smartphone application Study Xi, Strengthen the Country

Since October 2019, Chinese journalists have been forced to download the Study Xi, Strengthen the Country smartphone application to receive and renew their press cards. The application allows external parties to execute commands and collect personal information without the user's knowledge, thereby endangering journalists and their sources.

• The Party's daily instructions

Chinese media outlets and internet companies, whether public or private, are obligated to follow the Chinese Communist Party's instructions concerning issues deemed sensitive, including Tibet, Xinjiang, Hong Kong, Taiwan, corruption, social unrest, dissidents, etc. The Propaganda Department of the Chinese Communist Party, which controls the actions of 14 ministries, sends the media a daily list of topics to be highlighted and another list of topics they must not cover under penalty of sanctions.

• Forced television confessions

Journalists detained by the regime are sometimes forced to "confess" their alleged crimes on state television, an act that opposes human dignity and the presumption of innocence supposedly guaranteed by the Chinese constitution. According to the NGO Safeguard Defenders, Chinese state channels have broadcast forced confessions of no fewer than 93 victims since 2013, including of 30 journalists and media workers, most of them before their trials were even held.

A photograph of a man in a dark jacket and white face mask, with his right hand raised in a crowd. He is looking towards the camera. In the foreground, another person wearing a grey mask and a dark hood is partially visible. The background shows other people and a blurred urban setting.

1 HOW BEIJING DECLARED WAR ON JOURNALISM

- Ideological test, censorship, and harassment: Since President Xi Jinping came to power in early 2013, the Chinese Communist Party has drastically tightened its control over journalists. No matter the topic, those who refuse to comply with the official narrative are accused of harming national unity.
- The simple act of investigating a topic considered taboo or publishing censored information can result in years of detention in unsanitary prisons, where ill-treatment can lead to death. However, a number of journalists and independent media still resist and continue their reporting despite the danger.

The Party's tightened grip on the media



#MeToo movement, China-Taiwan relations, Tibet and Hong Kong protests: Very few topics escape censorship.
© Noel Celis / AFP
© Lobsang Wangyal / AFP
© Makoto Lin / Office of the President (Taiwan)

The proliferation of red lines

"July 23rd, 2021 • Regarding the heavy rain striking Henan and other places, shift the focus of reporting toward post-disaster recovery. Without prior permission, do not publish unauthorized images showing dead bodies, take an exaggeratedly sorrowful tone, or hype or draw connections to past events. Strictly adhere to authoritative information with regard to statistics on casualties or property damage. • Do not report on the Zheng Shuang tax case. • This morning, the State Council will hold a press conference on tracing the origins of Covid-19. Do not report."

In this [notice](#) sent to media on 23rd July 2021 and disclosed by the online media outlet *China Digital Times*, journalists were ordered to minimise the impact of the deadly floods that hit central China that month (reportedly killing at least 302 people, leaving 50 missing, and displacing hundreds of thousands), to avoid investigating the floods' causes, and to not question the official toll. They were also asked to ignore a monumental tax evasion case involving Zheng Shuang, a famous Chinese actress (who was fined US \$46 million), as well as the Chinese government's torpedoing of a World Health Organization (WHO) project to investigate the origins of the Covid-19 pandemic. Every day, the Propaganda Department of the Chinese Communist Party sends such instructions to all Chinese media, which are required to follow the guidelines to the letter or face sanctions.

In recent years, the number of "red lines", topics that are taboo for journalists to cover, has skyrocketed. Not only do journalists have to follow the official narrative regarding topics deemed sensitive, such as Tibet, Taiwan, Hong Kong, Xinjiang, corruption, social unrest, dissidents, and more, but now, in a blatant violation of Article 35 of the Chinese Constitution enshrining "freedom of speech [and] of the press", journalists are also forced to follow the Party's guidelines on the choice of their articles and their treatment of the subject matter.

No topic evades censorship

From natural disasters to the #MeToo movement, from students' sex lives to economic and financial policies or even recognition of health professionals during the Covid-19 crisis, very few topics now evade censorship. In April 2020, **David Bandurski**, co-director of the *China Media Project* research centre, said in an interview with the Washington Post that the Chinese Communist Party's leadership regarded journalism as "a threat to the stability of the regime".



© Philip Fong / AFP

Journalists can now only investigate cases that are already being processed by the authorities, which deprives them of the possibility to release new information. In 2015, journalist **Chai Jing**'s documentary *Under the Dome*, the product of a year-long investigation into China's pollution problem, was removed from Chinese video platforms a week after its release.

In March 2021, a provision of the Chinese criminal law was also introduced to prohibit any discussion challenging the official narrative of Chinese historical events. Only two months later, political commentator and former journalist **Qiu Ziming**, who had questioned the Chinese regime's transparency regarding a violent border clash between Chinese and Indian soldiers in June 2020, was [sentenced](#) to eight months in prison on the charge of "defaming heroes and martyrs".

The end of the pluralism and openness

Contrary to popular belief, censorship has not always been so drastic in China. From the end of the 1990s, and in particular under Hu Jintao's two terms as president between 2003 and 2013, the Chinese media benefited from the few small pockets of freedom that came with the country's economic development. A number of them began opening up to investigative journalism and pluralism of opinion, led by the famous Guangzhou-based newspaper *Southern Weekly* (in Chinese: Nanfang Zhoumo), at the time renowned for its independent tone, and published stories on progressive topics like corruption and rural poverty.

This was also the case for investigative journalist **Wang Keqin** and his team at the *China Economic Times*, whose work exposed corruption and public health scandals such as the "AIDS villages" in 2001, through which the world learned that 2 million rural inhabitants who sold their blood to survive had been infected with HIV/AIDS. They also disclosed the SARS (Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome) epidemic in 2003, which was then covered and debated in the Chinese media.

Investigative journalists are an "extinct species"

The accession to power of President Xi Jinping in March 2013 put an end to this timid opening. Paradoxically, the president, whose family was a victim of the cultural revolution, restored a media culture worthy of the Maoist era. Under the guise of a crackdown on "online rumours" that was later extended to any "vulgar" content, the new leader quickly took control of the professional media while leading a violent clampdown on non-professional journalists and bloggers.

The government's "war" on investigative journalism has discouraged newsrooms from investing time and resources in lengthy and costly investigations that risk censorship or that could get the media and its editors into serious administrative and legal trouble. According to a study conducted by Guangzhou-based Sun Yat-sen University and cited by US-based NGO Freedom House, the number of investigative journalists in China fell 58% between 2011 and 2017, a fall so dramatic that Liu Hu, a journalist based in Sichuan province and detained for a year between 2013 and 2014, told the New York Times in 2019 that they were becoming an "extinct species". In fact, most of the media are now content with basing their articles off the dispatches from the Xinhua propaganda agency.

IN FOCUS

“Pocket crimes” to gag the press

To silence journalists, the Chinese regime accuses them of “espionage”, “subversion”, or “picking quarrels and provoking trouble”, three “pocket crimes”, a term used by Chinese law experts to describe offences that are so broadly defined that they can be applied to almost any activity.

Espionage

- **Definition:** Chinese law defines state secrets as “matters that affect the security and interests of the state” and provides a list of potential subjects that is so broad that it might as well be industrial data or the birth dates of party leaders. As the list is not exhaustive, authorities can anyways retroactively classify any information they wish to censor as state secrets.
- **Legal basis:** Articles 110 and 111 of the Chinese Criminal Law; Law on Guarding State Secrets
- **Maximum penalty:** Life sentence (“Whoever illegally provides state secrets [...] outside the country”, more commonly known as “disclosing state secrets abroad”) and life imprisonment (“espionage”)
- **Further details:** As trials related to alleged state secrets are being held behind closed doors, no diplomat or journalist can attend.
- **Number of journalists currently detained under this accusation:** At least eight
- **Main targets:** [Chinese-born foreign journalists](#), such as Australian business news anchor **Cheng Lei** and Australian political commentator **Yang Hengjun**, arrested in 2020 and 2019 respectively, and Swedish publisher **Gui Minhai**, detained since 2015 and sentenced to ten years in prison in 2020.

Subversion

- **Definition:** “Whoever organises, plots, or acts to subvert the political power of the state and overthrow the socialist system” and “whoever instigates the subversion of the political power of the state and overthrow the socialist system through spreading rumours, slander, or other ways”
- **Legal basis:** Article 105 of the Chinese Penal Code
- **Maximum penalty:** Life sentence (“subversion”) and “more than 5 years” in prison (“inciting subversion of state power”)
- **Further details:** The law does not require proof of a potential or real subversive act to call it a crime. People accused of “subversion” are often refused visits from their lawyers and relatives.
- **Number of journalists currently detained under this accusation:** At least 13
- **Main targets:** Political commentators such as **Guo Quan**, [detained](#) since 31st January 2020 for publishing information on the Covid-19 pandemic, and **Wu Gan**, sentenced to [eight years in prison](#) in 2017 after denouncing the corruption of certain senior Chinese Communist Party officials.

Picking quarrels and provoking trouble

- **Definition:** Whoever undermines public order with provocative and disturbing behaviour”, more commonly known as “picking quarrels and provoking trouble”
- **Legal basis:** Article 293 of the Chinese Penal Code
- **Maximum penalty:** Five years in prison (ten years in the case of repeat offence)
- **Further details:** The law does not define the concept of “undermining public order”. In 2013, the scope of this law was widened to include content published on the internet, making it an ideal “pocket crime” to suppress the publication of information disturbing the regime.
- **Number of journalists currently detained under this accusation:** At least nine
- **Main targets:** Non-professional journalists such as **Cai Wei** and **Chen Mei**, sentenced in August 2020 to [15 months in prison](#) for reposting censored news articles related to the Covid-19 epidemic, **Liu Yanli**, sentenced in April 2020 to [four years in prison](#) for her online articles about Chinese leaders, and **Zhang Zhan**, 2021 RSF Press Freedom Awards laureate, sentenced in December 2020 to [four years in prison](#) for covering the early stages of the Covid-19 in Wuhan.



In February 2016, journalists from the country's state media were “invited” to warmly applaud President Xi as he passed on an inspection tour.

© Ma Zhancheng / AP

The stranglehold of ideological control

The role of journalists in China is spelled out in the [propaganda manual](#) given to Chinese Communist Party (CCP) officials. Its content was released by Wikileaks in 2007 and in an internal memo from the General Office of the CCP Central Committee. The latter, known as “Document No. 9”, was made public in 2013 by Deutsche Welle correspondent **Gao Yu**, leading to her being sentenced to five years [under house arrest](#) for “disclosing state secrets abroad”.

In the propaganda manual, journalists are explicitly described as a tool of the state “to mold generation after generation of new socialist people” and are expected to properly handle “the balance [of] praise and exposing problems”, a euphemism that expresses absolute self-censorship. “Document No. 9”, for its part, considers that “the West’s idea of journalism” challenges “the Chinese principle that the media and publishing system should be subject to Party discipline”.

In 2016, Xi Jinping launched a major media reform aimed at strengthening the CCP’s grip on the media. During an inspection tour of the country’s three main media outlets (CCTV, *People’s Daily*, and Xinhua News Agency), he did not hesitate to demand that journalists follow the Party leadership and “relay its will and its proposals, to protect its authority and its unity” by focusing on “positive” reports (in other words: Be consistent with official propaganda). Demanding absolute loyalty from the state media, Xi Jinping believes that they “must have the Party as their family name”.



© Simon Song / South China Morning Post

Personal blogs forbidden

Just one year later, journalists no longer had the right to keep a personal blog, which they had previously been able to use to share stories censored by their editors. They have also been forbidden to quote information from social networks if it has not been “confirmed” by authorities. Even foreign media outlets based in China are no longer able to freely post content online; any publication of an informative nature must be approved by the state administration before it can be uploaded.

Now, the term “media workers” is often used instead of “journalists” in official statements, even those made by the All-China Journalists Association (ACJA).

Study Xi’s Thought

On 8th October 2021, the National Development and Reform Commission, a State Council agency, proposed a plan to tighten private investments, which specifies that media funded by “non-public capital” shall not “engage in news gathering, editing and broadcasting”, including “news released by overseas entities”. If passed, this law could cement existing restrictions and tighten the regime’s grip on the media environment as well as silence remaining independent voices.

A week later, the General Administration of Press and Publications announced that professional journalists will soon have to undergo a minimum of 90 hours a year of “continuing training” partly focusing on Xi Jinping’s “Thought”. Journalists’ participation in this training, as well as their social media footprint, will be taken into account when renewing their press cards.

Under President Xi Jinping’s mandate, individual allegiance to the CCP and to its leader has become a prerequisite for working as a journalist. Journalists are caught in a complete stranglehold of ideological control, symbolised by the requirement to download the spy application Study Xi, Strengthen the Country onto their smartphones.



Command for this journalist and her peers: “Relay the will of the Party and its proposals, protect its authority and its unity.”
© Nicolas Asfour / AFP

IN FOCUS



© Reuters

Journalists forced to download spy app

The Study Xi, Strengthen the Country propaganda application not only allows the regime to assess journalists’ loyalty to its doctrine, but also to spy on their smartphones’ content.

Since October 2019, in order to obtain and renew their press cards, Chinese journalists have had to pass a test of loyalty to the doctrine of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) and President Xi Jinping, a test available only on the [Study Xi, Strengthen the Country](#) smartphone application, forcing them to download it.

Yet, the German cybersecurity firm Cure 53 revealed that the application, which was designed by e-commerce giant Alibaba for the CCP, could enable the collection of personal information without the user’s knowledge. Among other features, it would have the capability to modify files, download applications, make phone calls, and turn on the device’s microphone.

Reporters Without Borders (RSF) highly recommends journalists avoid downloading this application, which can compromise their security and the security of their sources. If it is absolutely necessary to install the application, we advise doing so on a specific device dedicated to this sole purpose that does not contain any sensitive information.

To thwart surveillance, reporters innovate

With increasing repression, journalists in China are being forced to employ strategic methods to carry out their investigations without attracting the attention of the authorities. In 2019, **Isobel Yeung** and her team at the international news website *VICE News* pretended to be tourists to shoot a hidden camera documentary on the repression of the Uyghur ethnic group in Xinjiang. However, this strategy has its limits – once the documentary was posted online, the journalist considered it too risky to return to China.

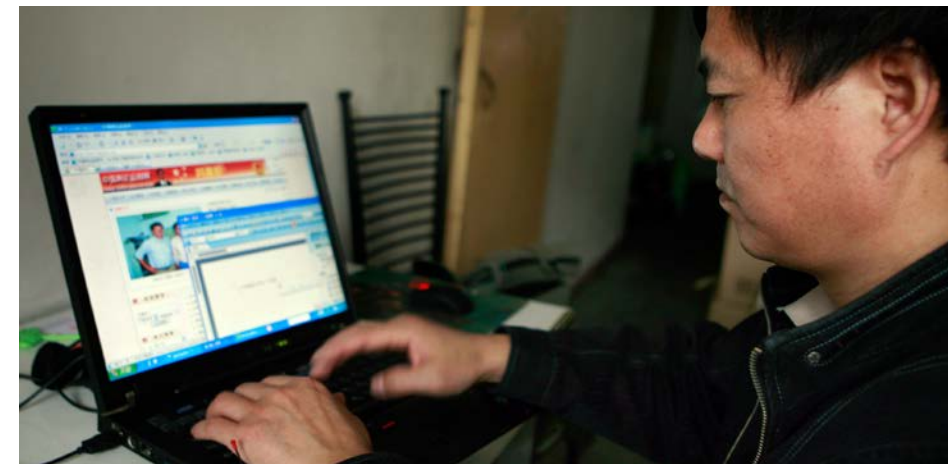
In Shanghai, former National Public Radio correspondent **Frank Langfitt** took the mimicry technique a step further by running a free taxi service in exchange for an interview from 2011 to 2016. The journalist did not hide his identity and submitted a possible broadcast with the approval of his passengers.

Journalists prevented from working on the ground in China also work from public information sources. The Associated Press correspondent **Yanan Wang**, *Foreign Policy* Deputy Editor in Chief **James Palmer**, and French publication *Le Monde*'s video department have thus remotely investigated the repression of the Uyghur ethnic group in Xinjiang by cross-checking China's public procurement, satellite photographs, and images collected on social networks.

Journalist **Megha Rajagopalan**, former director of the Beijing bureau of the New York-based publication *Buzzfeed News*, was awarded the [2021 Pulitzer Prize](#), along with her colleagues **Alison Killing** and **Christo Buschek**, for an investigation using satellite imagery to prove the reality of the massive internment of the Uyghurs.

A drive for a conversation: An unusual exchange offered by National Public Radio's Shanghai correspondent, Frank Langfitt, from 2011 to 2016.

© Kuan Yang



Social networks, public records, satellite photos: When denied access to the field, journalists use public information to investigate.

© Teh Eng Koon / AFP

Protect the source

Protecting journalists' own identities and those of their sources have also become major issues. **Zhang Jie**, a former Washington Post assistant in Beijing, shared in 2017 that she repeatedly used prepaid SIM cards and secondhand phones to contact human rights activists so that the police could not trace her.

Gyaltzen Choedak, an exiled journalist who covers Tibetan news for Voice of America, explained in March 2021 that he always uses a voice distortion software when speaking to his sources on the WeChat application and other Chinese microblogs that could be infiltrated by authorities.

WeChat is the most widely used messaging application by the Tibetan diaspora, especially by journalists, but the risks of data disclosure force them to use multiple phones and speak in coded language. This helps to mitigate the risk of surveillance but does not completely negate it, [explained](#) a journalist quoted anonymously in a research paper on Tibetan media in exile that was published in 2021.

Language precautions

Investigation is not the only dangerous part of the work. For Chinese journalists, posting censored information can be a one-way ticket to jail. In the city of Guangzhou, major media outlets such as the Southern Metropolis Daily, the Southern Weekly and the Yangcheng Evening News [call on Chinese legal experts](#) to assess the risks they might encounter in their investigations and advise them on their choice of vocabulary. One lawyer, who wishes to remain anonymous, explained: "We know how to frame problems properly in accordance with law. We actually use the official language to challenge the official ideology".

Journalists also use various language precautions to inform the public without exposing themselves to risks; for example, by refraining from directly naming officials, by portraying the government in a positive light, or by offering criticism in the form of suggestions.

Publish at any cost

Facing censorship forces journalists to use covert means to publish the information they gather. When their stories are rejected by domestic media, Chinese reporters sometimes turn to foreign media. This is what **Vicky Xu**, a Chinese journalist based in Australia, did when she worked on the persecution of Uyghurs for the New York Times in 2019. It was not without consequences: in addition to receiving threats, she became the target of a nationwide smear campaign in April 2021.

An anonymous post on social media is journalists' last resort to communicate when censored. This is what the relatives of investigative journalist **Huang Xueqin** did: After her [arrest](#) in September 2021, they shared information about her situation, along with the hashtag #FreeXueBing via anonymous accounts on Twitter, Facebook, and Github.

These media defy censorship

Despite ever-increasing censorship and pressure from Beijing, a number of independent media, based in China and elsewhere, have continued investigating and informing the public on current affairs in the Chinese-speaking world.



1 - MAINLAND CHINA



Caixin

Founded in 2009 in Beijing, the weekly newspaper Caixin and its Chinese-English bilingual website are considered the most independent mainstream media in China, constantly teasing the regime's red lines. In 2020, despite increased censorship, a Caixin investigation questioned the official Covid-19 death count in Wuhan. In October 2021, Caixin was removed from the official list of media that can be quoted as news sources.

caixin.com



China Citizens Movement

This Chinese-language news site, established in 2014 following the detention of Chinese writer and political commentator **Xu Zhiyong**, covers civil society and human rights news in China.

cmcn.org



Zhongxun

(Information for the Public)

This Chinese-language news site, founded in 2018, publishes reports by non-professional Chinese journalists and also hosts content censored by the regime.

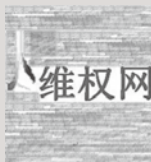
zhongxuncn.blogspot.com



64 Tianwang

This Chinese-language news site, founded in 1998, has documented tens of thousands of human rights violations in China and won an RSF award in 2016. Its founder, investigative journalist **Huang Qi**, winner of the 2004 RSF Press Freedom Prize, is currently serving a sentence of 12 years in prison for "disclosing state secrets abroad".

64tianwang.net



Wei Quan Wang

(Rights Advocacy Network)

This Chinese-language news site, maintained by a network of volunteers, has reported since 2008 on human rights violations in China, including arrests, disappearances, and illegal detentions of activists and journalists.

wqw2010.blogspot.com



Min Sheng Guan Cha

(Civil Rights & Livelihood Watch)

This Chinese-language news site, founded in 2006, covers the abuses committed against working class people, including workers and teachers, as well as forced evictions in large cities. Its founder, **Liu Feiyue**, was sentenced in 2019 to five years in prison for "inciting subversion".

msguancha.com

2 - HONG KONG



Citizen News

This Chinese-language, non-profit online media was launched in 2017 by a group of ten Hong Kong journalism veterans. Since 2021, it has been producing a TV program on Chinese current affairs in collaboration with the former crew of the famous "*China Beat*" programme, formerly broadcast on the i-CABLE channel.

hkcnnews.com



Hong Kong Free Press

Founded in Hong Kong in 2015, Hong Kong Free Press is a non-profit, crowdfunded, English-language news website that covers news on the Chinese-speaking world.

hongkongfp.com



InMedia

This online Chinese-language media, launched in 2004, describes itself as "an independent news and media platform for democratic and social movements" and opens its columns to articles and reports from non-professional Hong Kong journalists.

inmediahk.net



Stand News

This independent, generalist Chinese-language news site, founded in Hong Kong in 2014, covers Chinese politics and society and stands for the values of "democracy, human rights, freedom, the rule of law and justice".

thestandnews.com

3 - TAIWAN



The Reporter

This Taiwan-based, Chinese-language, non-profit news site was founded in 2015 and focuses on reporting and investigating the Chinese-speaking world. It has received 62 journalism awards, including the 2020 Human Rights Press Award in Hong Kong for a report on the Xinjiang "re-education camps".

twreporter.org

4 - SINGAPORE



Initium Media

This generalist Chinese-language online media, launched in 2015 in Hong Kong, received four awards in 2020 from the Society of Publishers in Asia (SOPA) for its journalistic work. To avoid pressure, *Initium Media* decided in August 2021 to move its headquarters to Singapore.

theinitium.com

5 - INDIA



Tibet Post International

This trilingual (English, Tibetan and Chinese) news website was founded in 2007 by a group of Tibetan journalists exiled in Dharamsala (North India) and mostly covers human rights violations in China's Tibet Autonomous Region.

thetibetpost.com

6 - UNITED STATES



Boxun News

Since 1998, this Chinese-language news site has been publishing articles by non-professional Chinese journalists about information censored by the regime such as epidemics, human rights violations, corruption scandals and natural disasters.

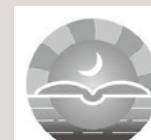
boxun.com



China Digital Times

This bilingual Chinese-English online media founded in 2003 in the United States provides valuable information about propaganda, censorship and cyber-surveillance in China by analysing and translating propaganda department directives, official rhetoric and censored keywords.

Chinadigitaltimes.net



Mingjing News

Mingjing News is a participatory news site covering Chinese politics, business, social issues and history. In 2014, it was the target of cyber attacks after disclosing information about a secret government investigation into Communist Party Political Bureau Standing Committee member Zhou Yongkang, which resulted in a closed-door trial sentencing him to life imprisonment.

Mingjingnews.com

Journalists in the crosshairs



If journalists dare to denounce officials' corruption, publish satirical cartoons, or defend human rights, they often find themselves in the courtroom.

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Independent journalism on its way out

Since President Xi Jinping came into power in early 2013, a wave of arrests unprecedented since the end of the Maoist era has hit journalists and political commentators across the country, abruptly ending a decade of experimentation with pluralism and debate in Chinese media. In the 2021 RSF World Press Freedom Index, the People's Republic of China ranks 177th out of 180, only two spots above North Korea, with at least 127 journalists and press defenders detained.

Investigative journalist **Huang Qi**, 2004 RSF Cyberfreedom Prize laureate and founder of the human rights news website 64 Tianwang, was arrested in 2016 and sentenced in July 2019 by the Mianyang Intermediate People's Court (Sichuan province) to [12 years in prison](#) for investigating human rights violations committed by Chinese officials. On 30th April 2020, journalist **Chen Jieren**, a former Chinese state media employee, was sentenced to [15 years in prison](#) by the Guiyang People's Court (Hunan province) for revealing facts of corruption implicating a number of Communist Party officials. In July 2018, cartoonist **Jiang Yefei**, known for his satirical cartoons, was sentenced to [six and a half years in prison](#), while well-known journalist and defender of press freedom **Qin Yongmin** was sentenced to [13 years in prison](#) for "subversion".

Heavy sentences

Non-professional journalists are also not immune from prosecution. Blogger **Wu Gan** was sentenced to [eight years in prison](#) in late 2017 by the Tianjin Court (north China) for raising awareness about the government's corruption. **Liu Feiyue**, founder and editor in chief of the human rights website *Civil Rights* and *Livelihood Watch*, was sentenced to [five years in prison](#) by the Suizhou Intermediate People's Court (Hubei province) in January 2019.

Not even border and nationality considerations restrain the Chinese regime, which currently detains [three foreign journalists](#) on charges of espionage. **Cheng Lei**, a high-profile Australian business news anchor working for state media group China Global Television (CGTN), has been detained since August 2020 under suspicion of "disclosing state secrets abroad". **Yang Hengjun**, an Australian political commentator, was arrested the year before under a similar accusation and has since been arbitrarily detained. Swedish national **Gui Minhai**, who founded a publishing house in Hong Kong, was condemned in 2020 to a 10-year prison sentence for a similar crime after being kidnapped in Thailand in 2015.

Torture and ill-treatment

Chinese prisons, notoriously unsanitary and managed without any transparency, allow all kinds of abuse, and detained journalists are almost systematically subjected to mistreatment and denial of medical care. **Kunchok Jinpa**, a tour guide and key news source from the autonomous Chinese region of Tibet until his arrest in 2013, died on 6th February 2021 at age 51 as a result of ill-treatment in his detention. He was serving a 21-year sentence in a Lhasa prison for "disclosing state secrets" after passing information to foreign media about protests in his home region of Driru (northeastern Tibet).

In 2017, 2010 Nobel Peace Prize and 2004 RSF Press Freedom Award laureate **Liu Xiaobo** and blogger **Yang Tongyan** both died from untreated cancers while in detention. According to RSF's count, at least ten press freedom defenders currently detained in China face impending death if not immediately released.



Ten emblematic prisoners



Ilham Tohti - 51

Occupation: Founder of information website Uyghur Online

City of detention: Urumqi (Xinjiang Autonomous Region)

Sentence: Life in prison for "separatism" (September 2014)

Possible cause: Criticising the government

Health condition: Heart condition and lung problems, weight loss; no information since late 2018.



Gulmira Imin - 43

Occupation: Former administrator of news site Salkin

City of detention: Urumqi (Xinjiang Autonomous Region)

Sentence: Initially, life sentence for "separatism" and "disclosing state secrets abroad" (April 2010). Her sentence was reportedly reduced to 19 years and 8 months in prison in 2017.

Possible cause: Criticising the government

Health condition: Before her trial in 2010, she was the victim of ill-treatment and torture; no information since 2010.



Lu Jianhua (Wen Yu) - 60

Occupation: Political commentator for CCTV, Phoenix TV, Singapore Strait Times

City of detention: Yancheng Prison, Yanjiao (Hebei Province)

Sentence: 20 years in prison for "disclosing of state secrets" (December 2006)

Possible cause: Commenting on the economic, political, and social situation in China

Health condition: The NGO Independent Chinese Pen centre noted deteriorating health; authorities refused a request for medical release.



Zhang Haitao - 49

Occupation: Political commentator for *Boxun*, Radio Free Asia and Voice of America

City of detention: Shaya (Xinjiang Autonomous Region)

Sentence: 19 years in prison for "incitement to subversion" and "disclosing state secrets abroad" (January 2016)

Possible cause: Criticising the actions of the Beijing regime on social media and in interviews with foreign media

Health condition: Beaten and forced to wear heavy chains around his ankles for six months; victim of food deprivation; no information since April 2018.



Qin Yongmin - 68

Occupation: Political commentator and editor in chief of information website *China Human Rights Watch* and *Rose China* newsletter

City of detention: Wuhan (Hubei Province)

Sentence: 13 years in prison for "incitement to subversion" (July 2018)

Possible cause: Suggesting the idea of a peaceful transition to a democracy respectful of human rights, including freedom of the press

Health condition: Severely weakened by 20 years of detention and labour camps in previous decades, he passed out during his trial. His health deteriorated further in 2019.



Huang Qi - 58

Occupation: Founder of information website 64 Tianwang

City of detention: Bazhong (Sichuan Province)

Sentence: 12 years for "disclosing state secrets abroad" (July 2019)

Possible cause: Giving voice to victims of abuse under the Chinese state apparatus

Health condition: Heart and liver complications resulting from eight years in prison and labour camps; suffered assault and sustained injuries.



Yiu Mantin (Yao Wentian) - 76

Occupation: Founder of Morning Bell Press publishing house

City of detention: Dongguan (Guangdong Province)

Sentence: Ten years in prison for "smuggling of prohibited products" (May 2014).

Possible cause: Attempting to publish a book about President Xi Jinping

Health condition: Asthmatic, heart condition, prostate cancer and hepatitis B; suffered five strokes, despite which his medical parole applications were denied; no further information since November 2017.



Gui Minhai (Michael Gui) - 57

Occupation: Principal shareholder of Causeway Bay Bookstore and Mighty Current Publishing House

City of detention: Ningbo (Zhejiang Province)

Sentence: Ten years in prison for "illegal dissemination of classified information abroad" (February 2020); detained since 2015

Possible cause: Attempting to publish a book on the private life of President Xi Jinping

Health condition: Symptoms of severe neurological disease; prevented from consulting the doctor at his embassy (Swedish citizen since 1996), in defiance of consular law.



Wu Gan - 49

Occupation: Human rights defender and commentator on Twitter

City of detention: Qingliu (Fujian Province)

Sentence: Eight years in prison for "incitement to subversion" (December 2017)

Possible cause: Making humorous comments about corruption among Communist Party officials

Health condition: Victim of torture and sleep deprivation; lost 15 kilogrammes in detention; no further information since March 2019.



Jiang Yefei - 53

Occupation: Cartoonist for information website *Boxun*

City of detention: Chongqing (Sichuan Province)

Sentence: Six years in prison for "incitement to subversion" and "illegal border crossing" (July 2018)

Possible cause: Drawing satirical cartoons on human rights violations in China

Health condition: Reportedly tortured and blind in one eye from lack of treatment.

Media blockade in Xinjiang

Since 2016, in the name of the "fight against terrorism", the Beijing regime has been conducting a violent campaign of repression against the Turkic-speaking Muslim population, mainly ethnic Uyghurs, in the northwestern Xinjiang Autonomous Region, accompanied by an unprecedented media blockade. According to widely reported international media reports, at least one million people are being arbitrarily detained in "vocational training centres" that resemble concentration camps.

While answering the questions of a journalist from the French daily publication l'Opinion on this matter in June 2021, Lu Shaye, the Chinese ambassador in Paris, [oscillates](#) between false naivety and assumed paranoia: "If a 'genocide' or many other massive human rights violations had really taken place (...), how come no one has ever revealed them on social media? There are so many foreign tourists, diplomats and journalists who visit Xinjiang. Of course, there are Western journalists. Even if they see positive aspects, they scrape out the negative aspects to make their stories."

Here, the ambassador "forgets" to mention that the few foreign journalists still allowed to visit Xinjiang are placed under close surveillance, cannot travel and interview freely, and, if their reporting displeases Beijing, risk seeing their names in bold on the blacklist of journalists banned from entering Chinese territory. In August 2018, **Megha Rajagopalan**, China bureau chief of *Buzzfeed News*, was [forced to leave the country](#) after the non-renewal of her visa. The previous year, she had published a report describing Xinjiang as a "frontline laboratory for surveillance".

Chinese journalists who dare to defy censorship risk even more. Photojournalist **Lu Guang**, a two-time World Press Award winner, [disappeared](#) and was reportedly taken in custody in 2018 after he went to Urumqi, the capital of Xinjiang, to meet with local photographers, and was reportedly placed under residential surveillance. Uyghur journalist and scholar **Ilham Tohti**, laureate of the Council of Europe's Václav Havel Prize and the European Parliament's Sakharov Prize, has been serving a [life sentence](#) for "separatism" since 2014, as has **Gulmira Imin**, former administrator of the news site Salkin, who has been detained since 2009. In October 2021, after posting a documentary on YouTube in which he identified nearly 20 Uyghur detention centres in the region, Chinese vlogger **Guanguan** fled to the United States in fear of reprisals.

In the Xinjiang Autonomous Region, journalists' slightest movements are controlled – when they are not detained.

© Johannes Eisele / AFP



Since launching the repression campaign in 2014, officially "against terrorism", authorities have [arrested](#) several hundred Uyghur intellectuals, including many journalists. In May 2019, the NGO Uyghur Human Rights Project (UHRP) [revealed](#) that the regime detained no fewer than 58 journalists, editors, and publishers from the region. In November 2021, RSF counted 71 detained Uyghur journalists, more than half of the 127 journalists and press freedom defenders imprisoned in China.



INTERVIEW

"The regime puts pressure on our relatives in China"

Gulchehra Hoja, journalist for the Uyghur section of private media Radio Free Asia (RFA), which is funded by the US Congress, and laureate of the 2019 Magnitsky Human Rights Award and 2020 International Women's Media Foundation's Courage in Journalism Award, reflects on the pressure put on journalists covering the Xinjiang autonomous region.

What is the media situation in the Xinjiang Autonomous Region?

In recent years, the restrictions on media coverage of Xinjiang have led to an information blackout in the region, and as a result independent reporting has been mostly provided by media outlets based outside of China. As we grew up in the region and can speak the local language, my colleague and I are able to counter the regime's propaganda and inform the world about the real situation in the region. Because we publish independent information, the Chinese government is seeing us as a threat to their policy. That is why they want to silence us.

What types of attacks do you have to face?

As it cannot reach us directly, the regime puts pressure on our relatives in China. My family has been targeted by the Chinese government since I moved to the United States in 2001, so they constantly harassed and questioned them. In September 2017, my relatives suddenly closed the WeChat conversation with me, and I heard that my brother had been arrested by the Chinese government because of my work. On 3rd February 2018, my parents and 24 other relatives were arrested. As I know right now, all of our Uyghur section's staff have family members in the concentration camps or jails to put pressure on them.

Can these pressures have an impact on your work?

We won't be silent because we are the voice for millions of voiceless Uyghurs and other Muslim minorities in Uyghur region. The information we publish is crucial. It helps denounce the cultural genocide that is currently being carried out in the region.

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Foreign correspondents as unwanted witnesses

Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesperson Zhao Lijian, during a press conference on 29th July 2022, referred to the BBC (British Broadcasting Corporation) as a “Bad-mouthing Broadcasting Corporation” that “attacked and vilified China in serious deviation from the professional ethics of journalism” and produced “fake news”, further illustrating the regime’s growing paranoia towards foreign journalists. These words were intended to “justify” physical harassment and online threats towards foreign correspondents, including those from the BBC, *the Los Angeles Times* and Deutsche Welle, who covered the catastrophic floods in central China (Henan province) that month. Notably, these attacks were carried out by the Communist Youth League of China.

It is not the first time the regime has attacked the British public broadcaster, which officially had its license to broadcast in China [revoked](#) on 4th February 2021. The following month, **John Sudworth**, the BBC’s China correspondent for nine years, was forced to flee the country following repeated threats from authorities, who were unhappy with his coverage of the crackdown on the Muslim Uyghur population in the Xinjiang Autonomous Region. In 2017, after writing an article on the Skynet mass surveillance system, a project that required the installation of 200 million surveillance cameras in the country, Sudworth was accused of having “political prejudice and a mental issue” by the official Chinese media outlet *Global Times*.

The end of the “golden age”

Foreign correspondents in China have always struggled, especially when covering politics or human rights issues. There was a time, however, in the 1990s and 2000s when they and their Chinese colleagues enjoyed a certain freedom of investigation and could access the sources of information necessary for their work, official or otherwise. For the authorities, it was a necessary evil: Even if they sometimes contained disturbing information, the articles of foreign correspondents fulfilled the essential role of informing the world on the economic and social development of China, therefore attracting investors and business partners.

Already particularly violent, the harassment against foreign correspondents has intensified with the Covid-19 pandemic.

© Thomas Peter / Reuters



Two decades later, the situation has dramatically changed, and this “golden age” of foreign journalists in China is truly gone. The Chinese regime, which declared war on independent journalism and equipped itself with the most powerful propaganda machine in the world, pictures foreign correspondents as unwanted witnesses to silence. In its annual [report](#) published on 1st March 2021, the **Foreign Correspondents’ Club of China (FCCC)** denounced the intensification of harassment alongside the Covid-19 health crisis. The regime instituted a true system of intimidation of foreign correspondents based on surveillance and the growing use of visa blackmail. In 2020, no fewer than 18 foreign correspondents were forced to leave the country.



© BBC

Pressure on the sources

Harassment does not stop at the journalists themselves but also affects their staff and sources. On 7th December 2020, **Haze Fan**, a Chinese national and *Bloomberg* agency news assistant – who previously worked for international news outlets CNBC, CBS News, Al Jazeera, and Thomson Reuters – was [arrested](#) by the Beijing National Security Bureau for allegedly “endangering national security” and remains in incommunicado detention without a trial date. Sources of information, essential to journalists, are also increasingly scarce and almost always claim anonymity due to fear of reprisal. In 2018, retired university professor **Sun Wenguang**, 84, a notable figure in the pro-democracy movement in China, was [arrested at his home](#) in the city of Jinan (Shandong province) in the middle of a live telephone interview for Voice of America radio (VOA).

The risk of being taken hostage

The risk of an expulsion from China is no longer even the main concern for foreign correspondents, who now face the risk of being held hostage in the event of a political crisis with their country. Three foreign journalists of Chinese descent are currently detained on espionage charges in China: Swedish publisher **Gui Minhai**, founder of a Hong Kong publishing house, who was sentenced in 2020 to ten years in prison, and Australian journalists **Yang Hengjun** and **Cheng Lei**, arrested in 2019 and 2020, respectively, and since detained without a trial date.

On 3rd September 2020, Australian correspondents **Bill Birtles** (ABC News) and **Michael Smith** (the *Australian Financial Review*) had to seek refuge in the Australian embassy to escape arrest after investigating the case of Cheng Lei. The two journalists were finally able to leave the country on 7th September after being forced to undergo police questioning.

This increased pressure by the Chinese regime on foreign correspondents has a strong impact on the quantity and quality of information they produce and limits the coverage and understanding of events in China. In an article in the English-language online magazine *ChinaFile* from August 2020, **Josh Chin**, former deputy head of the *Wall Street Journal* China bureau who was expelled in February of the same year, lamented that it had become harder “to bring in that street-level colour that humanises the story”.



2

HONG KONG: PRESS FREEDOM IN FREE FALL

- The National Security Law, imposed by Beijing in 2020, gave the Hong Kong government a pretext to prosecute at least 12 journalists and press freedom defenders, ten of whom have been detained, and to shut down Apple Daily, the territory's largest Chinese-language opposition newspaper.
- In order to please the Chinese regime, Hong Kong's chief executive, Carrie Lam, targets symbols of press freedom such as public media group RTHK (Radio Television Hong Kong) and turns a blind eye to the violence on journalists.

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A crackdown on independent media

“National security”, no matter the cost

A quarter of a century after Hong Kong's handover to the People's Republic of China, the principle of press freedom, although guaranteed until 2047 in the Basic Law that commands the territory, is more threatened than ever. Within one generation, Hong Kong slipped down the ranks in the RSF World Press Freedom Index from 18th place, upon the index's creation in 2002, to 80th place in 2020.

During this period, Beijing [progressively took control](#) of parts of Hong Kong's Chinese-language media and established an indirect system of putting pressure on other media through their advertisers. On 30th June 2020, the situation further worsened with the adoption by China's highest legislature, the Standing Committee of the National People's Congress, of the *Law of the People's Republic of China on Safeguarding National Security in the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region*.

The deliberately vague text gives a maximum life sentence for crimes of “terrorism”, “secession”, “subversion”, and “colluding with foreign forces” and opens the door to arbitrary arrests and sentencing under the appearance of legality. According to **Keith Richburg**, director of the Journalism and Media Studies Centre at the University of Hong Kong, who was interviewed by the US-based television channel CNBC in May 2021, the law condemns freedom of the press in Hong Kong to a slow but inevitable disappearance, which he compared to the gruesome ancient Chinese torture of “death by a thousand cuts”.

Since the adoption of the National Security Law, 12 journalists and press freedom defenders have already been indicted for “crimes” against the state.

© Anthony Wallace / AFP



“Crimes” that bear a life sentence

The law, equally ambiguous in its original Chinese version and its English translation, entered into force immediately after its enactment and is applicable to any journalist reporting on the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region, regardless of their location (Article 38).

In the case of trial in Hong Kong, journalists face consequences as severe as life imprisonment, and although the word “extradition” is never mentioned, the law reserves the possibility for trials to be conducted in the People's Republic of China (Article 55), where national security crimes are punishable by death. The law also reserves the right for certain trials to evade the gaze of the media and the public (Article 41).

To enforce the law, the Beijing regime established the Office for Safeguarding National Security in Hong Kong (Article 48) in charge of supervising the media and the activity of foreign correspondents (Article 54) and has created a Committee for Safeguarding National Security (Article 12), which operates out of the jurisdiction of local courts (Article 14) and is therefore able to freely engage in intimidation and surveillance of journalists and their sources.

A regulation repeatedly postponed

In the 1990s, when Hong Kong became the main gateway to information about China, its reporters investigating on the mainland already risked being accused of “crimes against the State”. In 1994, **Xi Yang**, a reporter for the daily newspaper *Ming Pao*, was sentenced to 12 years in prison for “theft of state financial secrets” after he disclosed the stock market strategy of the Central Bank of China. Following this conviction, journalists in Hong Kong staged a series of demonstrations.

In 2002, just five years after the territory was handed back to China from Britain, the Hong Kong executive, under pressure from Beijing, made a [first attempt](#) to propose to the Legislative Council the adoption of a national security law punishing crimes against the state with life imprisonment. The bill was quickly withdrawn after half a million Hong Kongers took to the streets in protest, concerned about the direct threat to political, religious and media freedoms such a regulation would have.

In 2014, Hong Kongers once again [took to the streets](#) to demand more democracy, in particular including the election of the Legislative Council by universal suffrage; this was the so-called “Umbrella Movement”, during which the Central business district was peacefully occupied for 79 days before the protesters were violently chased away by the police. The Beijing regime, fearing it might one day lose control over the territory, began working with the Hong Kong executive on a future security regulation draft.

Forcing the way

Early in 2019, newly appointed Chief Executive Carrie Lam embarked on a campaign to promote a new piece of legislation, the “Fugitive Offenders and Mutual Legal Assistance in Criminal Matters Legislation (Amendment) Bill 2019”, also known as [the extradition bill](#) which would allow residents or visitors accused of a crime in Hong Kong to be extradited to mainland China. Although the bill theoretically excludes political and economic crimes and cases in which human rights could be violated, Hong Kongers feared that their representatives would not be able to oppose Beijing's demands, especially in cases concerning activists or journalists.

In the spring, Hong Kongers took to the streets again. On 9th June, there were 1 million protesters; by 16th June, this number grew between 1.5 million and 2 million, almost one in every two working people, an unprecedented number in the territory of almost 7.5 million inhabitants. The Hong Kong executive was once again forced to abandon the bill. For the Beijing regime, this humiliation was the breaking point. In the midst of the health crisis caused by the Covid-19 pandemic, Beijing adopted the [National Security Law](#) that it imposed on the special administrative region in defiance of its autonomy.

IN FOCUS

The four crimes against the state

The four "crimes against the state" provided by the National Security Law are worded so vaguely that all possible interpretations can be used to silence journalists.

“Collusion with a foreign country or with external elements to endanger national security”

- **Maximum penalty:** Life imprisonment
- **Definition:** Engaging in “hostile activities” or provoking “hatred” towards China by “providing State secrets or intelligence”; “conspiring with a foreign country or an institution”; “directly or indirectly receiving instructions” from a foreign country or organisation
- **Precedent in China:** Beijing's propaganda systematically portrays the foreign media as government agents working to promote the interests of the state where they are headquartered. In 2020, at least 18 journalists working for foreign media outlets were [expelled](#) from China. In 2021, there were at least three foreign journalists [detained](#) by the Chinese regime under the accusation of espionage.
- **Enforcement in Hong Kong:** In 2020, **Jimmy Lai**, the founder of *Apple Daily*, was charged with this crime. In 2021, six Apple Daily employees, including journalists, were [charged with conspiring with Lai](#) to “collude with foreign forces”. In January 2020, Hong Kong Chief Executive Carrie Lam suggested that foreign media, and even Hong Kong media founded by foreign residents, could be mouthpieces of Western governments.

“Subversion”

- **Maximum penalty:** Life imprisonment
- **Definition:** “Overthrowing or undermining” China's “basic system” or seriously “interfering in, disrupting, or undermining” the performance of duties of the central power in China or the body of power in Hong Kong
- **Precedent in China:** At least 13 journalists are detained under the charges of “subversion of state power” and “inciting subversion”.
- **Enforcement in Hong Kong:** Press freedom defenders **Claudia Mo** and **Gwyneth Ho Kwai-lam** have been [detained](#) in 2021 under this crime for supporting democracy and press freedom in the territory. Journalists who report on pro-independence events or quote pro-independence activists, as well as those who write critical opinion pieces or investigative pieces concerning the Chinese regime, could be charged with this crime.



Victor Mallet, a journalist who was expelled from Hong Kong in 2018 after serving as a moderator at a debate that featured a pro-independence activist, could have been accused of “secession” if the National Security Law existed at this time.

© Paul Yeung

“Secession”

- **Maximum penalty:** Life imprisonment
- **Definition:** “Undermining national unification” and “separating Hong Kong” from China
- **Precedent in China:** In the mainland, this crime is often conflated with “separatism” and extends to any individual or group, such as Uyghurs and Tibetans, promoting regional cultures and languages. Journalist and academic **Ilham Tohti** was sentenced to [life imprisonment](#) on charges of “separatism” in 2014.
- **Enforcement in Hong Kong:** Under the National Security Law, any journalist writing on Hong Kong's cultural identity or the pro-independence movement could be charged with “separatism”. Victor Mallet, Asia news editor for the *Financial Times*, was [expelled](#) from Hong Kong in 2018 for having served as a moderator at a debate held by the Foreign Correspondents' Club (FCC) that featured a pro-independence activist. Had the security law existed at this time, Mallet could have been accused of “secession”.

“Terrorist Activities”

- **Maximum penalty:** Life imprisonment
- **Definition:** “Causing or intended to cause grave harm to the society” by committing “activities which seriously jeopardise public health, safety or security”
- **Precedent in China:** At least 71 journalists are currently being detained under terrorism-related charges as part of Beijing's crackdown on the Uyghur ethnic group in the Xinjiang Autonomous Region. **Wahitjan Osman**, former senior editor at the Xinjiang Education Press publishing house, has been detained since 2016 for promoting “separatism and terrorist ideology”.
- **Enforcement in Hong Kong:** As the Chinese regime and Hong Kong executive often refer to the pro-democracy movement as “terrorism”, reporting at the scene of protests could be prosecutable under the National Security Law as an act of terrorism. Similarly, in China, foreign reporters who report on these movements could be arrested or expelled for “supporting terrorism”.

Journalists, the new black sheep



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On 29th May 2023, **Wong Ka-ho**, the deputy editor in chief of the City University of Hong Kong's student journal, and **Ma Kai-chung**, a reporter for the online media Passion Times, will appear in criminal court for “rioting”, a crime punishable by seven years in prison. The two journalists were arrested on 1st July 2019 while covering protesters' incursion into the grounds of the Legislative Council of Hong Kong from the sidelines of protests against the extradition bill that rallied more than 500,000 people. Bringing these two reporters into the courtroom for simply doing their jobs further illuminates the recent decline in Hong Kong's press freedom. At last count, no fewer than 12 Hong Kong journalists and press freedom activists are being prosecuted for crimes against the state, including ten in detention, and four others have been arrested under non-national security crimes.

The freelance reporter **Wilson Li Chung-chak**, a contributor to British television channel ITV, was the first Hong Kong journalist arrested under the National Security Act, just one month after its enactment. Released on bail, he is still being prosecuted for “colluding with foreign forces”. **Jimmy Lai**, the founder of daily newspaper *Apple Daily*, now closed by the government, did not have the chance to be released on bail and remains in detention to this day under the charge of “conspiracy to collude with foreign forces”. [Six former employees of the group](#) are also in detention: general manager **Cheung Kim-hung**, executive editor in chief **Lam Man-chung**, associate publisher **Chan Pui-man**, chief editor **Ryan Law Wai-kwong** and editorial writers **Fung Wai-kong**, and **Yeung Ching kee** (known under the pen names Lo Fung and Li Ping, respectively).



Reporters can now be arrested simply for performing their professional duties.
© Stand News

Among the victims of the National Security Law are two well-known Hong Kong press freedom defenders, both [detained](#) on charges of “conspiracy to commit subversion”: **Claudia Mo**, ex-legislator and former journalist, and **Gwyneth Ho Kwai-lam**, a former politician and *Stand News* reporter who livestreamed an attack on pro-democracy protesters, journalists, and commuters by pro-Beijing triad members at Yuen Long metro station on 21st July 2019.

In parallel, the Hong Kong government also revived a sedition provision dating back to the British colonial era and unused since the 1970s to prosecute radio host **Wan Yiu-Sing**, known under the pseudonym “Giggs”. Detained since November 2020, the journalist has been denied bail twice and faces a 14-year prison sentence.

Even the venerable Hong Kong Journalists Association (HKJA), founded in 1968, is now under attack by the government for “daring” to support prosecuted journalists. In September 2021, the Hong Kong secretary for security and former police chief Chris Tang accused the association of “infiltrating schools” and “[roping] in student journalists to be members”.



Claudia Mo, ex-legislator and former journalist, risks life sentence for supporting democracy and press freedom.
© Peter Parks / AFP

IN FOCUS

Jimmy Lai, RSF Awards laureate, risks life sentence

Jimmy Lai, Apple Daily founder and 2020 RSF Press Freedom Awards laureate, has for the past three decades been an outspoken advocate for press freedom and democracy in Hong Kong. Detained since December 2020, he was the first media-related target of the National Security Law and risks a life sentence.

"It is our responsibility as journalists to seek justice", wrote **Jimmy Lai**, 73, in a letter from his jail cell, on 12th April 2021. Anticipating further attacks on the *Apple Daily* newspaper, which Lai founded, he called on his staff to "keep [their] heads high".

Jimmy Lai, 2020 RSF Press Freedom Awards laureate, is a historical supporter of press freedom in Hong Kong. He was one of the first figures targeted by the National Security Law, under which he [risks a life sentence](#). Detained since December 2020, he is facing multiple charges and has already been sentenced to 20 months in prison for "organising" and "taking part" in three "unauthorised" protests.

Having fled to Hong Kong at the age of 12, when Maoist China was facing one of the deadliest famines in history, Lai taught himself English while working in sweatshops. In 1981, he founded the Giordano clothing brand, which quickly expanded internationally and later made his fortune. The Tiananmen massacre, on 4th June 1989, determined his commitment to democracy and press freedom. In 1990, he launched the weekly Chinese-language magazine *Next Magazine* and in 1995, the newspaper *Apple Daily*.

Jimmy Lai and the media he founded were the target of constant harassment by the authorities, and of a few criminal attacks. In 2013, his home was rammed into by a vehicle, with the assailants leaving an axe and a machete as a warning. In 2015, masked individuals threw Molotov cocktails at his home and the newspaper's headquarters. In 2019, during the demonstrations against the extradition bill, Lai was once again subject to street attacks and his home was set on fire.

© Isaac Lawrence / AFP



"Under heavy rain, Hongkongers bid farewell to Apple Daily": one million copies sold for the last edition.

© Apple Daily

The dismantling of Apple Daily

In the early hours of 17th June 2021, 500 police officers surrounded the headquarters of Next Media Group, whose publication *Apple Daily* is one of the most popular print media in Hong Kong. A scene typically associated with a terrorist attack or a bomb alert but for Hong Kong, the target which required such a [stampede](#) was the media group itself.

Intervening under the orders of Beijing, the police stormed *Apple Daily* and forced journalists to leave the newsroom, seizing their computers, phones and other devices. In parallel raids, the police arrested the newspaper's main executives at their homes. Later on the same day, the government announced the freezing of the assets of *Apple Daily*'s parent company, Next Digital, making the media group unable to continue paying its staff and suppliers and thus forcing it to close shortly afterwards.

One week later, on 24th June, *Apple Daily* published its final edition. By the end of the day, it reached a record circulation of one million copies, ten times what would normally sell in a day. Many Hong Kong residents queued all night long outside news stands to show support for the 26-year-old newspaper that has become a symbol of press freedom in the former British colony. It was this wide support from Hong Kong residents which, until that day, had allowed the media to resist the constant harassment and the imprisonment in December 2020 of its founder **Jimmy Lai**.

At the beginning of September 2021, *Apple Daily*'s parent company, Next Digital, filed for liquidation, with its board of directors resigning to help facilitate the process. By the end of the month, the government had gone to court to petition the wind up of Next Digital.



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IN FOCUS

To stay or to risk prison, the dilemma of Hong Kong journalists

According to a survey conducted in June 2021 by the Foreign Correspondents' Club (FCCHK), nearly half of Hong Kong-based journalists are considering to leave the special administrative region. Interviewed by RSF, some of these journalists discuss the impossible choice to leave or to risk prison.

Two days after the arrest of an *Apple Daily* commentary writer at the Hong Kong airport on 27th June 2021, **Kris Cheng**, an outspoken former editorial director at the online media outlet Hong Kong Free Press, made the painful decision to leave the territory.

"That arrest spooked a lot of journalists. I think that was the last straw for me," Cheng said. He has relocated to the United Kingdom, where he is a freelancer for the US-based public broadcaster Voice of America. Due to the distance and time difference, Cheng can hardly cover Hong Kong news, which he finds too gloomy, anyway: "A lot of the Hong Kong stories right now are, unfortunately, about people being prosecuted in the courts, and I can't attend in person," he said.

Investigative journalist **Bao Choy** (pictured centre-right), who in April 2021 was [sentenced](#) to pay a fine for alleged false statements while producing a documentary critical of police inaction during an attack on pro-democracy protesters, journalists, and commuters by pro-Beijing triad members, has also left Hong Kong for a journalism fellowship in the United States. Although this break is "more than welcome", she does not see it as a definitive exile. "As a journalist, I cannot just run away because I could be arrested. There is still room for journalists to do their work," Choy said.

The chairman of the Hong Kong Journalists Association (HKJA), **Ronson Chan**, believes that journalists' decisions to either relocate or stay are based on various factors. "Many are concerned about the future of their families and want to prevent further suffering under Hong Kong's worsening political climate," Chan says, "but some of them cannot easily leave because they are unsure of what they can do as journalists in a foreign country." The Covid-19 pandemic, which caused many countries to enforce travel restrictions, has also reduced options for journalists who may want to relocate.

Although most Hong Kong-based journalists fear for their future, many refuse to abandon Hong Kong to its fate: "We constantly have to cast out subconscious self-censorship thoughts, but we're here to stay", a Hong Kong-based editor from an online news website, who requested to be quoted anonymously, said. "We're going to take it day by day to see what compromises might have to be made to ensure the longevity of our operations and the safety of the staff while keeping intact our code of ethics, journalistic standards, and mission."



© Anthony Wallace / AFP

A two-decade downfall of press freedom

Chronicle of a decline foretold

On 1st July 1997, when British Hong Kong returned to China, many of its residents were concerned that China would not respect the press freedom they had enjoyed since the 1980s, despite this right being enshrined in the Special Administrative Region's Basic Law in accordance with the "one country, two systems" principle.

In mid-1996, Lu Ping, director of the Hong Kong and Macao Affairs Office under the State Council, warned that following the handover, journalists should no longer advocate "two Chinas", "one China, one Taiwan", or the "independence of Hong Kong", leading many to believe that a clampdown on the free press was programmed. Soon-to-be Chief Executive, Tung Chee-hwa, added to the Hong Kong residents' concerns by stating in a speech prior to the handover that, in Chinese society, "order" was more important than "individual rights".

"A conscious, deliberate and sincere effort"

To everyone's relief, little changed in the weeks and months that followed the region's return to its motherland, and the media were able to continue operating without deviating from their usual independence from the government. One month after the handover, at a seminar on media freedom in postcolonial Hong Kong, **Tim Hamlett**, a Senior Journalism Lecturer at Hong Kong Baptist University, recognised that the central government was making "a conscious, deliberate and sincere effort to leave Hong Kong to itself" although he doubted it would last in the long term. Indeed, Beijing's apparent goodwill left many journalists [sceptical](#).

In September 1997, only two months after the handover, the commission of the Chinese Foreign Ministry in Hong Kong tried to again alleviate Hong Kong residents' concern by reiterating its pledge to not "interfere with the normal reporting activities of local and foreign journalists". In a report published at the time, press-freedom organisation Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ) admitted that the fear of a clampdown on Hong Kong media had so far "not been realised" but warned about a growing risk of "self-censorship" that could, in the long run, threaten press freedom in Hong Kong.

The situation remained much the same throughout the first decade of the millennium. In 2003, when half a million Hong Kongers took to the streets to demand the dropping of the first national security bill, the press was able to do its job without too many obstacles, with the newspaper *Apple Daily* even proving itself to be a [major player](#) in the protest, with the front-page slogan "See you in the streets".

Daily newspaper SCMP acquired by Alibaba

In September 2011, the appointment of Patrick Li, a bureaucrat with no journalistic experience as the head of the public broadcasting group Radio Television Hong Kong (RTHK), which had not happened in years, was the first serious violation of press freedom in the territory.

In 2012, journalists working for the English-language daily *South China Morning Post (SCMP)* were alarmed when Wang Xiangwei, a journalist from the mainland and a member of the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference, was appointed editor in chief. The media's takeover three years later by conglomerate Alibaba Group Holdings, founded by Chinese businessman Jack Ma, at that time very close to the Communist Party of China, did nothing to allay journalists' fears.

Chief Executive demanding “an apology”

The term of the third chief executive, Leung Chun-ying, better known as C.Y. Leung, between 2013 and 2017 experienced a clear deterioration in relations between the authorities and the press. In his first year in office, he demanded a letter of apology after the newspaper *Hong Kong Economic Journal* published an article about his alleged links with organised crime groups. He was to make [numerous other verbal attacks](#) on the independent press, including *Apple Daily*.

In 2014, Hong Kong journalists themselves were the target of large-scale police violence for the first time when police broke up the pro-democracy Umbrella Movement, leaving more than 2,000 injured, including around 30 journalists. The physical attacks on the press, whether by the police or by pro-Beijing mafia gangs, would never stop. From then on, C.Y. Leung and his successor Carrie Lam also began an open war against the independent media, constantly reducing their influence and their ability to cover protest movements in the territory.



On 30th June 1997, British Hong Kong was handed back to China. A quarter of a century later, press freedom in the territory has dramatically dropped, confirming the initial fears of Hongkongers.
© Paul Lakatos / AFP

IN FOCUS

Public broadcaster RTHK plagued by censorship

The public broadcaster RTHK, whose editorial independence was once the pride of Hong Kong residents, is now facing full-scale censorship under its new programme director.

Since 1st March 2021, the day Patrick Li [took up his position](#) as Radio Television Hong Kong's (RTHK) Director of Broadcasting, at least 12 new productions have been pulled from the air at short notice and more than 200 archived programmes have been removed from the public broadcaster's YouTube channel. An episode of the political show *LegCo Review*, which included footage of an event commemorating the Tiananmen massacre, was also removed from RTHK's archives for having been broadcast without Li's “final approval”.

This bureaucrat with no media experience, who has become a political commissar for RTHK, has set up a complete censorship system at the group, a media outlet previously renowned for its fearless investigations on public policies. Not satisfied with slashing the programmes he disapproves of, he has also threatened to halve the salaries of employees involved in the production of content that he deems unfit for publication.

In September 2021, the broadcasting group adopted new editorial guidelines asking journalists to “support the government in safeguarding national security and interests”, to refrain from “provoking or deepening hatred, discrimination or hostility” towards the Hong Kong executive and Chinese government, and to avoid contact with “foreign governments or political organisations”. RTHK also established a partnership with Chinese state broadcaster China Media Group in August 2021, with the aim of nurturing “patriotism” among viewers.

Patrick Li's recruitment has led to the resignation of at least four senior staff members, namely executive producers **Fong Hiu-shan**, **Liu Wai-ling** and **Doris Wong**, and award-winning reporter, **Yvonne Tong**. Another journalist, **Nabela Qoser**, known for her uncompromising questioning of government officials, was also denied a contract renewal.

Veteran British journalist and political commentator, **Steve Vines**, who had been contributing to RTHK's programmes for over three decades, left Hong Kong in August 2021 following the broadcaster's decision to axe the English language political talk show he hosted, *The Pulse*: “No one in their right mind can possibly assert that Hong Kong is a safe place for journalists.”



© RTHK / YouTube Screenshot



Reporters confronted with physical violence

On 12th June 2019, amidst pro-democracy demonstrations, the atmosphere at the daily Hong Kong police press briefing was particularly tense. All the journalists attending the conference were wearing helmets and “combat gear”, necessary to protect themselves from [police violence](#), which is becoming increasingly systematic and causing hundreds of injuries among journalists. These abuses have been [widely documented](#) by the HKJA, but the police have always denied them.

Rubber bullets, water cannons, tear gas, batons, handcuffs, and insults: This was the routine for journalists covering the protests. In the territory, which for a long time had been a model of press freedom in the world, the police seem to have definitely abandoned their relative restraint, which was a legacy of the British colonial era, and instead started adopting the method of maintaining order that is in vogue in the rest of China: hitting the crowd, both the demonstrators and the journalists.

Deliberately pepper sprayed

Hong Kong journalists, who once favored light, comfortable clothing for the futuristic, subtropical city, have had to adapt quickly. The new, more radical outfit resembles the garb of a construction site instead of any extravagant style, and includes safety shoes, a waterproof mask, a reflective waistcoat, and a gas mask: protections that have become indispensable to their work, as the risk of injury or respiratory damage has become so great.

In September 2019, a journalist working for the Indonesian-language media *Suara Hong Kong News*, **Veby Mega Indah**, permanently lost sight in her right eye after being hit by a [rubber bullet](#). In November of the same year, a journalist from the online media *Mad Dog Daily* was shot with a water cannon and suffered brain damage, requiring emergency surgery. Police officers have been seen regularly and deliberately pepper-spraying the press or firing projectiles at groups of duly identified journalists. In May 2020, a police officer reportedly choked an *Apple Daily* photojournalist for nearly 20 seconds as she was restrained.



Mob attacks

In addition to the violence committed by the police, pro-Beijing factions do not hesitate to call on local mafias to settle their accounts with the press. In March 2014, at the start of the pro-democracy “Umbrella movement”, journalist **Kevin Lau**, then editor in chief of the daily *Ming Pao*, was seriously injured with a hatchet. The assailants have since been tried and convicted, but not the instigators. Several criminal attacks had also targeted pro-democracy media, including *Apple Daily* and its founder, **Jimmy Lai**.

In July 2019, reporter **Gwyneth Ho Kwai-lam** was both a witness and a victim of a large-scale assault by a pro-Beijing mafia gang on protesters, journalists, and passers-by at Yuen Long metro station. Broadcasting the attack live on video, she was beaten by the assailants, who left her with a bloody arm. Three other journalists working for *Apple Daily* and Now News TV channel were also injured in the attack.

In May 2021, reporter **Sarah Liang** of the newspaper *Epoch Times* was repeatedly hit in the legs with a baseball bat by two men near her apartment building. The newspaper's warehouse had already been [stormed](#) a month earlier by four armed individuals, who threatened employees and damaged the main printing press. Two years earlier, it had been the target of an arson attack that fortunately did not cause any casualties.



Rubber bullets, water cannons, tear gas: the new routine for journalists covering protests in Hong Kong.

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Carrie Lam's doublespeak

In 2017, Carrie Lam was unsurprisingly elected as Hong Kong chief executive by an electoral college largely in favour of the Beijing regime, which supported her candidature. This somewhat lacklustre senior civil servant, whose experience is limited to 37 years of service in the air-conditioned world of the Hong Kong administration, succeeded the very unpopular C.Y. Leung, who was known for his repeated attacks on the media. One of the first decisions taken by Carrie Lam was to [open government press conferences](#) to independent online media, a measure journalists had demanded for a long time. One could almost have hoped for an improvement in press freedom.

Unfortunately, Carrie Lam soon revealed her true face: that of a puppet of the Beijing regime, whose liberticidal policies she never ceased to defend and implement in the name of "patriotism", while loudly asserting that the Hong Kong people had lost none of their freedoms. In early 2019, she attempted to pass a law that would have allowed the [extradition of journalists](#), and others to China, triggering unprecedented protests in Hong Kong that forced her to abandon the project. During these demonstrations, many journalists were physically abused by police officers, something that Carrie Lam has always refused to acknowledge.

Canned language

On 12th August 2019, in [response](#) to a letter from RSF denouncing the violence and suggesting ways out of the crisis, Carrie Lam claimed to recognise "the vital importance of the free and unfettered flow of information, and a free and open media environment, to Hong Kong's success in the past, present and future". However, she fails to reassure when she claims, against all evidence, that "police respect the freedom of the press and the rights of the media to report on public events and incidents" and that "reporters in Hong Kong do not face charges or get jailed for writing stories, filing television reports or taking photographs".

Less than a year after she assured the protection of journalists, on 30th June 2020 Carrie Lam publicly welcomed Beijing's adoption of a "national security" law that allows it to directly intervene in the territory in defiance of her authority as chief executive, in order to punish those whom the regime considers responsible for crimes against the state with life imprisonment, including journalists.

Justifying the unjustifiable

A few months later, Carrie Lam invoked this law to orchestrate the judicial harassment of **Jimmy Lai**, founder of *Apple Daily* and 2020 RSF Press Freedom Awards laureate, former legislator and ex-journalist **Claudia Mo**, and 12 journalists prosecuted on charges of "crimes against the state". This law was also used as a pretext to freeze *Apple Daily's* financial assets, forcing it to close down by the end of June 2021. What the government was criticising *Apple Daily* for, she explained blithely, "is neither a news outlet problem nor a news reporting problem" but that it was "endangering national security" as it refused Beijing's censorship and allowed opposition movements to express themselves.

Carrie Lam's speeches, forced into a permanent split to justify the unjustifiable, take on surreal overtones: "It's not a problem to criticise the Hong Kong government, but if there is an intent to organise activities to incite the subversion of the government then that is, of course, a different thing [...] Media friends should have the ability to distinguish between them". However, since the National Security Law itself does not anywhere define where criticism ends and subversion begins, the only way for journalists to protect themselves from being accused seems to be... to stop all criticism.

A patient unraveling

Carrie Lam is patiently unravelling the substance of press freedom in Hong Kong. In 2021, in order to take editorial control of the audiovisual group Radio Television Hong Kong (RTHK), she appointed a programme director who [set-up a censorship system](#) and who, as a courtesy, invited her to host her own daily talk show for a month.



Journalists' arrests, canned language, and visa weaponisation: Carrie Lam orchestrated an accomplished campaign to dismantle press freedom.

© RTHK / Screenshot

Her administration also backpedaled on press accreditations, now reserved to “internationally recognised” media - which, in the absence of a clear definition, is purely arbitrary and effectively excludes independent media, freelance journalists, and student press. In September 2021, journalists from Hong Kong’s two veteran online media outlets, *Stand News* and *Citizen News*, were denied access to Chinese National Day celebrations.

Lastly, Carrie Lam introduced the practice, frequently used on the mainland, of [visa weaponisation](#) against foreign journalists. In 2018, she had **Victor Mallet**, a *Financial Times* journalist, expelled for moderating a lunch-debate for the Club of Foreign Correspondents (FCCHK) with a pro-independence activist. In 2020, she also rejected the visa applications of *New York Times* correspondent **Chris Buckley**, who had just been expelled from mainland China, and of journalist **Aaron Mc Nicholas**, who was to join the independent online media *Hong Kong Free Press (HKFP)*. In November 2021, Carrie Lam’s office also refused, without explanation, to renew the visa of **Sue-Lin Wong**, a journalist with the British weekly *The Economist*.

IN FOCUS

Macau’s independent media on borrowed time

Macau, the other special administrative region of China, is often portrayed as the “poster child” contrary to rebellious Hong Kong, but has also seen a decline in its already limited press freedom.

On 20th October 2021, *Macau Concealers*, an online news site that had operated since 1996 and aspired to present a “diversified view” of the city, announced it would cease operations that same day, citing “unprecedented environmental changes” that include increased censorship and pressure on independent media.

After Macau returned to China in 1999, two years after Hong Kong, the former Portuguese colony had no choice but to quietly accept its fate: With a population of just under 700,000 and an economy based on the gambling industry, Macau must maintain good relations with mainland China. Its media, smaller and more fragile than those of Hong Kong, had little choice but to increasingly align with the Beijing regime’s narrative, while retaining a certain level of independence on local issues considered less “sensitive”. Although in 2009 Macau adopted a national security law that punishes crimes against the state with up to a 30-year prison sentence, until now it has never been invoked.

In 2019 and 2020, Macau’s media largely stayed away from covering Hong Kong’s pro-democracy protests due to their heavy reliance on public funding. A few English and Portuguese-language media, however, provided extensive coverage, leading to increased pressure and threats against them.

In December 2019, ahead of Chinese President Xi Jinping’s visit to Macau, journalists from at least five Hong Kong media outlets were refused entry to the territory on the grounds that they would “endanger the public security”. Reporters for the Portuguese public television, RTP (Rádio e Televisão de Portugal), were questioned by the police for hours and had their filming materials seized. Moreover, a number of local journalists reported being stalked and harassed, and some have been warned to “be cautious with their speech” during Xi Jinping’s visit.

Fourteen journalists had to resign after the executive committee of public broadcaster TDM (Teledifusão de Macau) issued, in April 2021, a [set of guidelines](#) ordering them “not to disclose information or express opinions contrary to the policies of China and Macau’s government” and “to promote patriotism”, under threat of dismissal.



© Macau Photo Agency



3 WHEN ACCESSING INFORMATION BECOMES A CRIME

- By equipping itself with unprecedented technological means, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) has set out to build a model of society in which access to information is no longer a right, but a crime. To resist censorship, propaganda and mass surveillance, and to preserve their freedom of expression, Chinese internet users are increasing their efforts and creativity.
- Under the pretext of countering the influence of Western “hostile forces”, China is exporting its conception of rogue journalism to serve state interests and working to spread its propaganda around the world through increasingly insidious means. Faced with this threat, governments and civil society in democracies can no longer wait to react.

© Bobby Yip / Reuters

The obsession to keep public opinion in check

Covid-19: A burst of freedom quickly suppressed

In early February 2020, calls for greater freedom of expression in China abounded on the internet following the death of **Dr. Li Wenliang**, an ophthalmologist at Wuhan Central Hospital and the [first whistleblower](#) or the appearance of Covid-19. A few days before his death from the disease, the police forced him to sign a statement recognising that he had "spread false rumours" before they made him a hero, posthumously.

In only a few days after his death, the hashtag #WomenYaoYanlunZiyou ("We want freedom of expression") was used more than two million times on the Chinese social network Sina Weibo to pay tribute to the deceased doctor and to denounce the mismanagement of the crisis by the authorities, a movement of a fairly unprecedented scale in a country where the control of content on social networks has been tightened significantly in recent years. Most of these messages have since been deleted under pressure from the censorship services.



Following the death of doctor Li Wenliang, the epidemic's first whistleblower, some citizens spontaneously went to investigate in Wuhan.

© Mark Ralston / AFP

The exasperation and mistrust of Chinese citizens at the regime's lack of transparency, as well as the lack of information in official media, prompted some to journalistically document the pandemic, which was spiraling out of control. Among them, **Chen Qiushi**, a lawyer from the far northeast province of Heilongjiang, spent much of his time in Wuhan's hospitals from 23rd January 2020 onwards, reporting on the chaos and interviewing the families of victims.

Fang Bin, an ordinary textile businessman living in Wuhan, also felt the need to inform his fellow citizens about the reality of Covid-19 and posted his first video report on 25th January 2020, in which he documented the oversaturation of the hospitals. The two non-professional journalists were [reported missing](#), probably arrested by the police, at the beginning of February 2020. Chen Qiushi first reappeared on social media on 30th September 2021 without discussing what happened to him in the meantime. However, there is still no news concerning Fang Bin's whereabouts.

Minimisation of the epidemic

Citizens' appetite for reliable and independent information contrasts with President Xi Jinping's call on 20th January 2020 to "reinforce public opinion management" to deal with the epidemic. As inquiries from more liberal publications such as *Caixin* and *Caijing* piled up in addition to the authorities' lack of preparation and maneuvers to conceal the seriousness of the crisis, the Party sent nearly 300 "journalists" – who were actually propagandists – to Wuhan to present the fight against the epidemic from a "positive" angle

Chinese authorities also very quickly expressed the need to contain the flow of information and free expression on the internet. A joint *New York Times* and *ProPublica* [investigation](#) published in December 2020, based on 3,200 directives and 1,800 memos from the Cyberspace Administration of China (CAC) from January to May 2020, revealed the [strategies](#) in place to shape public opinion online. Minimisation of the disease's impact on news sites by limiting terms like "incurable", blocking keywords and notifications related to the crisis and the mobilisation of online commentators were all part of the arsenal used by Beijing.

Suppression of critical voices

Soon after Dr. Li's death, the CAC sent the following directive to its local branches: "We must recognise with clear mind the butterfly effect, broken windows effect and snowball effect triggered by this event [Li Wenliang's death], and the unprecedented challenge that it has posed to our online opinion management and control work. All Cyberspace Administration bureau must pay heightened attention to online opinion, and resolutely control anything that seriously damages party and government credibility and attacks the political system."

The repression of critical voices accompanied this censorship undertaking. The NGO Chinese Human Rights Defenders (CHRD) documented 897 cases involving [Chinese netizens penalised](#) between 1st January and 26th March 2020 for their online speech related to the Covid-19 outbreak in China. At least ten journalists and online commentators were arrested in 2020 for covering the crisis, including journalist **Zhang Zhan**.



© Chen Qiushi / YouTube Screenshot

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© Zhang Zhan / YouTube Screenshot

Four years in prison for reporting in Wuhan

Sentenced to four years in prison for covering the Covid-19 epidemic on social media from the beginning in the city of Wuhan, journalist and 2021 RSF Press Freedom Awards laureate Zhang Zhan demonstrates her innocence with a partial hunger strike that could cost her life.

After a mere three-hour trial, **Zhang Zhan**, 38, RSF Press Freedom Award laureate 2021, was sentenced on 28th December 2020 to four years in prison by a Shanghai court for “picking quarrels and provoking trouble”. In February 2020, she was among the courageous journalists who, despite the risk of contagion, had travelled to the city of Wuhan to cover the very beginnings of the Covid-19 epidemic. Zhang Zhan had posted more than 100 videos on her [YouTube Channel](#), WeChat and Twitter, before being reported missing on 14th May 2020 in Wuhan. The next day, authorities announced that she was detained.

In the indictment, the prosecutor accused her of “posting large amounts of false information” but did not present any factual evidence that would support the charge. The journalist, who has always refused to plead guilty, has given up on appealing; according to one of her lawyers, the agents of the detention centre would have made her understand that the only result to be expected from an appeal would be to get a heavier penalty.

To protest against this denial of justice, Zhang went on a partial hunger strike that resulted in her being force-fed through a nasal tube. Her health condition has deteriorated considerably: in late October 2021, the journalist, who is 1.77 m tall, [weighed barely 40 kg](#) and could no longer move or even lift her head without assistance. By August 2021, she had already been hospitalised for 11 days.



Censorship and surveillance have reached an all-time high in China. © Aly Song / Reuters

China's internet under surveillance

On 2nd November 2021, on Chinese social network Sina Weibo, international tennis champion **Peng Shuai** accused former member of the Standing Committee of the Party's Political Bureau and former Deputy Prime Minister Zhang Gaoli of rape. In less than 30 minutes, her post and all associated public comments were deleted and the athlete's account was removed from the search engine. The censors are trying, by all means, to cover up a scandal that risks splashing the upper echelons of power. Peng Shuai herself was later reportedly placed under house arrest.

Two months earlier, messaging application WeChat censored an article from investigative magazine Caixin that detailed the questionable financial practices of Chinese real estate giant Evergrande, whose difficulties in repaying colossal debt were beginning to shake the Chinese economy. Earlier in 2021, encrypted messaging application Signal and audio application Clubhouse, which briefly allowed internet users to create discussion groups on banned topics, were also banned from the Chinese internet.

Banned keywords

In China, it is almost impossible to search on Google or use a foreign messaging system such as WhatsApp - at least without resorting to virtual private networks (VPNs) that allow you to connect from another country. The “Great Firewall”, a technical system developed by the regime to isolate the Chinese internet from the rest of the world, and constantly improved, not only makes it possible to block the IP addresses of a large number of websites, but also to censor content containing banned keywords. GreatFire, an NGO which fights against censorship in China, estimates that [160 of the 1,000](#) most visited websites in the world are thus inaccessible in the country.

During the 2000s, however, a wind of freedom had blown over the then rapidly developing Chinese internet, allowing internet users to express their opinions fairly freely, including their dissatisfaction with the political class. From 2010, the Chinese regime became aware of the danger that this represented to its domination and reinforced control. In 2014, the regime set up an internet watchdog group, which in 2018 would become the Central Cyberspace Affairs Commission, chaired by Xi Jinping himself. Its executive arm, the Cyberspace Administration of China, is deploying a wide range of measures to control the online activity of China's one billion internet users.

"Clean-up" campaigns

According to the American NGO Freedom House, no less than 11,000 Chinese websites and 737,000 social media accounts and group chats were shut down in 2019. Now only certain official accounts and government-licensed news websites are allowed to disseminate information, especially about politics, economics, military, and foreign affairs. In February 2021, even bloggers were ordered to stay away from social issues deemed “sensitive”.

Censorship adapts to the context of the moment, generating thematic “clean-up campaigns” as shown in the [WeChatSCOPE](#) project led by the Journalism and Media Studies Centre of the University of Hong Kong. In June 2021, the search engine Baidu and the social network Sina Weibo blocked the search results of three major cryptocurrency exchanges after the Chinese government announced its bitcoin ban. The next month, WeChat deleted a dozen LGBTQ+ accounts managed by students across China on the pretext that they were breaking rules of information on the internet.

At least two million censors

The number of people working for the internet censorship apparatus in China remains unknown, but in 2013, an official source reported [two million employees](#), and the number has arguably increased significantly since then. In August 2021, it was revealed that the censors of the Weibo platform had a minimum quota of 500 censorship reports per month, of which 90% had to be substantiated, or else they would lose their jobs.

Foreign companies are also forced to submit to censorship rules to keep a foothold in the Chinese market. In August 2020, 3,487 internationally available applications were [missing](#) from Apple's Chinese App Store, including 148 Chinese news sites. In October 2021, the website LinkedIn, a subsidiary of the Microsoft group, announced the shutdown of its Chinese service because of the growing censorship. A month later, American portal Yahoo! also announced it would leave China, a mostly symbolic withdrawal as many of its services were already blocked by the regime's digital censorship.

"The Party is watching you"

Conversation monitoring has also reached a frightening level. Since 2014, regulations have required internet users to register under their real name for messaging applications and online information services. The content of conversations, unencrypted, and posts on social networks are directly accessible to the authorities, and all content can be used as evidence in criminal cases.

In 2019, BBC's China correspondent, **Stephen McDonell** had his WeChat account deactivated without warning after posting photos of a vigil in Hong Kong commemorating the 30th anniversary of the Tiananmen massacre. To regain access to his account, the journalist was forced to let the application scan his face and record his voice.

On 14th September 2021, the *Financial Times* also revealed that the Chinese authorities had diverted an anti-fraud mobile application, in theory designed to protect users against online scams, and were using it to identify internet users who had visited “highly dangerous” websites... such as the economic news agency *Bloomberg*.

Battalions of trolls

The Communist Party's propaganda services have also spread their tentacles across social media. The regime maintains the “50 Cent Army”, a small-time [propagandist battalion](#), paid 50 Chinese Yuan cents (7 Euro cents) per message, with the mission of promoting the official narrative by posing as ordinary citizens. In 2017, a [study](#) published in the American Political Science Review estimated that these regime servants create 448 million social media posts per year.

With the rise of Chinese nationalism, a battalion of pro-regime volunteers has also flourished on Chinese and foreign social networks. Nicknamed the “little pinks” because of the belief that most of them are young women, these belligerent netizens are defending the regime tooth and nail against criticism. In October 2021, [the song “Fragile”](#) by Malaysian singer **Namewee** and Australian singer **Kimberly Chen**, which pokes fun at the heightened sensitivity of these trolls, rose to be the number one most viewed video on YouTube in Taiwan and Hong Kong after being banned in China.

The song “Fragile”, which gently pokes fun at Chinese nationalist trolls, rose to be the number one most viewed video in Taiwan and Hong Kong after being banned in China.

© Namewee / YouTube Screenshot



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© Martin Bureau / AFP

Advanced technology engineered for repression

Beijing is taking advantage of the latest technological breakthroughs to tighten its control over information and to monitor the flow of opinion, sketching out a dystopian project for a society in which no conversation is beyond the reach of the prying eyes of the Party.

In April 2021, Chinese researchers from the Shenyang Ligong University and the Chinese Academy of Sciences proudly announced that they had developed an AI text censor system able to learn on its own and adapt to changes in the language of internet users. Under the pretext of fighting crime, the regime has developed ever more invasive technologies in recent years, such as the Sharp Eyes mass surveillance programme, launched in 2015, which aims to equip the entire Chinese territory with facial recognition cameras, succeeding Sky Net's video surveillance program.

The regime's protectionist policies, by eliminating international competition, have allowed the emergence of national IT champions such as the search engine Baidu, the e-commerce giant Alibaba, and the internet and telecommunications giants Tencent, Huawei, and ZTE. In return, these companies are forced to assist the regime in its censorship, propaganda and surveillance programmes.

The Xinjiang Autonomous Region, a scene of a violent repression, has been used by the regime as a testing ground for the development of facial recognition in collaboration with Chinese start-ups such as Hikvision, SenseTime, CloudWalk, and iFlytek. Its inhabitants are also forced to install spy applications, which scan the phone's activity for “deviant” behaviours, including having digital copies of Muslim books, writing or receiving Quran verses in chat logs, and donating for a mosque.

Using such technologies, the Chinese regime hopes to establish a “[smart police](#)” in the near future, which would be able to predict future criminal activity, and a “social credit” system that will modulate the rights of citizens according to their behavior. Considering that investigative journalist **Liu Hu** was blacklisted as early as 2017 from an experimental local social credit system due to [past arrests and convictions](#) in connection with his work as a journalist, one can only tremble at such a project for a society that evokes the dystopian universe of science fiction film *Minority Report* and television series *Black Mirror*.

This is even more worrying as Chinese surveillance technologies are being exported. In August 2021, the Top10VPN website [revealed](#) that 17 of the 68 governments administering their internet in collaboration with Huawei were using its technologies to block access to certain news sites. Around the same time, the Lithuanian National Cyber Security Centre [called on the public to get rid](#) of smartphones from Chinese brands Huawei, Xiaomi, and OnePlus, which contained software capable of censoring more than 1,300 keywords banned in China.



This meme that circulates on social networks illustrates how much trust can be placed in technologically advanced Chinese products when it comes to privacy.

© Facebook

A million ways to resist

In the week of 8th February 2021, a chat group called “The Hu Xijin Fan Club” went viral on the Clubhouse audio chat room app. The group aimed to mock ultra-nationalist state media *Global Times*’s editor in chief, who, regarding the US economic stimulus package announced by US President Joe Biden on 14th January 2021, had stated: “If our country hands out money to everybody, it means it doesn’t send out money at all”. A web user quipped: “If there’s a wall everywhere, it means there isn’t a wall anywhere”, a cryptic reference to China’s internet censorship system and to the anti-immigration wall undertaken by Biden’s predecessor Donald Trump.

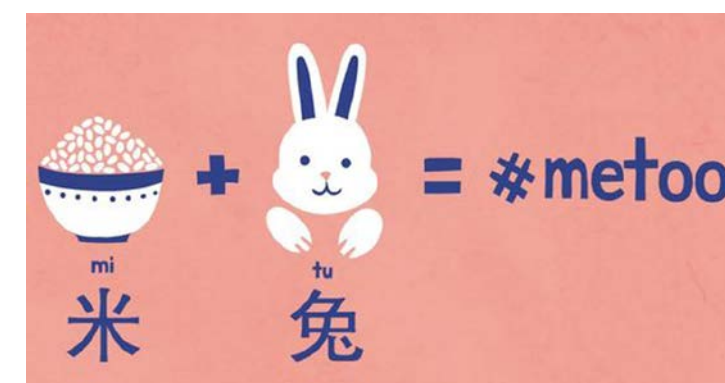
The Chinese public, permanently confronted with the sanitised rhetoric of the Communist Party, is not fooled and constantly looks for new solutions to inform themselves more reliably and to share information without being censored. “The Chinese obviously have a distrust of what the authorities tell them, even if that news is widespread and on every media channel. They even distrust the authorities when they report on something that is true”, testify the founders of the NGO GreatFire.

“River crab” and “water meter”

As soon as censors block a keyword related to a controversial topic, internet users use their imaginations to create new ones. A fairly common way is to replace a banned word with a homophone, a word that sounds the same but is written in different characters. In January 2018, the term “rice bunny” (mǐ-tù in Chinese) appeared on the social network Weibo, since it is pronounced exactly like the hashtag #MeToo, which the authorities had temporarily censored. The term “river crab” (héxiè in Chinese), a homophone of the word “harmonised” that refers to the project of a harmonious society launched by former president Hu Jintao, describes in the internet language the fact of being censored.

Other alternatives include using the initials of words in Latin transcription such as “ZF” for government (zhèngfǔ in Chinese), or allusive expressions such as “checking the water meter” to mean “pay someone a home visit”, in reference to the presumed habit of the Chinese police to disguise themselves as water management employees to circulate incognito within buildings.

At the start of 2020, while the Covid-19 epidemic was raging in China, internet users demonstrated ingeniousness to pay tribute to the whistleblower doctor **Li Wenliang**, who died of the disease, and to denounce the attitude of the Party, despite censorship and surveillance. Some posted selfies wearing masks with “I cannot” and “I do not understand” written on them, referring to Dr. Li’s reply to the police’s request to stop “spreading false rumours” and understand the situation. An article from *Ren Wu* magazine, a sister publication of *People’s Daily*, which denounced the censorship imposed on doctors and had been removed from newsstands, was salvaged using screenshots and translations in English, in Morse code, in braille, and even in emojis.



To bypass censorship, the Chinese people use Chinese language homonyms, such as the word string “rice-rabbit” which is pronounced exactly like the hashtag #MeToo.

© Marcella Cheng / The Conversation

Open-source and blockchain

Github platform, the largest open-source website that allows engineers and developers around the world to collaborate on code and software projects, has also become a sanctuary for censored content. In 2019, employees of Chinese tech companies collected thousands of uncensored testimonies as part of the "[996.ICU](#)" project aimed at denouncing abusive working conditions in their professional sector. It is difficult for the government to block access to this platform, which is essential for the development of the new technology sector.

Chinese internet users have also resorted to [blockchain](#) technology, in which data is shared across a large number of computers and cannot be erased. In April 2018, a letter from activist **Xue Yin** detailing how Beijing University attempted to cover up sexual assault was posted anonymously on the *Ethereum* blockchain platform. In July that same year, the technology was used to preserve an investigation exposing the ineffectiveness of a vaccine given to infants.

Cat-and-mouse game

For the sake of economic competitiveness, the authorities have so far also tolerated Chinese companies using Virtual Private Networks (VPNs) which make it possible to bypass the "Great Firewall" and to connect to censored websites in China. However, the central government is gradually restricting access to these tools, especially as part of a [campaign](#) in 2017 to "clean up" the internet: popular providers such as GreenVPN and Haibei VPN have had to shut down their activities and companies. Apple has [removed](#) all VPN apps from its Chinese App Store.

Foreign VPN service providers, unable to promote their products or charge for their services in China, are effectively left out of the competition. As for Chinese VPNs, they are more than likely to [share their data](#) with the authorities. Several people have already been sentenced - including one person sentenced to five and a half years in prison and fined 500,000 Chinese yuan (almost US \$80,000) - for selling or using VPNs on the grounds that they "accessed the international internet through illegal channels". In 2019, the Chinese Cyberspace Administration also issued a regulation that bans anonymity on blockchain platforms. The Chinese authorities are also finally trying to develop an alternative to Github, which will facilitate the implementation of their censorship measures.

This cat-and-mouse game perpetually obliges internet users to deploy their imaginations to find new solutions. Although this creativity is commendable, one could wonder, like NGO Amnesty International did in an [article](#) published in March 2020, if "such wisdom and imagination could be better spent on something more productive than fighting a constant battle to be heard".

INTERVIEW

"China's censorship will soon use machine learning"

NGO GreatFire develops solutions against censorship in China and won the 2013 "Best of Online Activism" award from German public broadcaster Deutsche Welle. Its founders, who wish to remain anonymous, agreed to answer RSF's questions.

How did you start GreatFire and how did the organisation evolve?

We started GreatFire in 2011 to bring transparency to online censorship in China. Our initial project, Analyzer [later renamed Blocky], provides a list of foreign websites blocked in China. But since Chinese platforms are even more subject to censorship, we decided to launch an uncensored version of the microblogging platform Weibo called FreeWeibo. We reiterated the project with the messaging application WeChat when the latter started to overtake Weibo in terms of popularity. We then developed the website AppleCensorship.com, which monitors how Apple censors its own worldwide App Stores under pressure from the Chinese authorities. We currently have nine active projects, which, in a way, reflect the development of the censorship apparatus in China and are fighting against it.

What obstacles have you faced throughout this journey?

The Chinese Communist Party's official media were quick to accuse us of being 'anti-China', when we are merely fighting for the constitutional right of Chinese citizens to be able to express themselves freely. Chinese authorities did not leave it there as they launched a massive cyberattack against us in 2015 from which, fortunately, we managed to recover. However, our biggest obstacle is the difficulty of making our tools known to the Chinese public. We go through big foreign websites that are not blocked in China and we also rely on word of mouth but this is not enough.

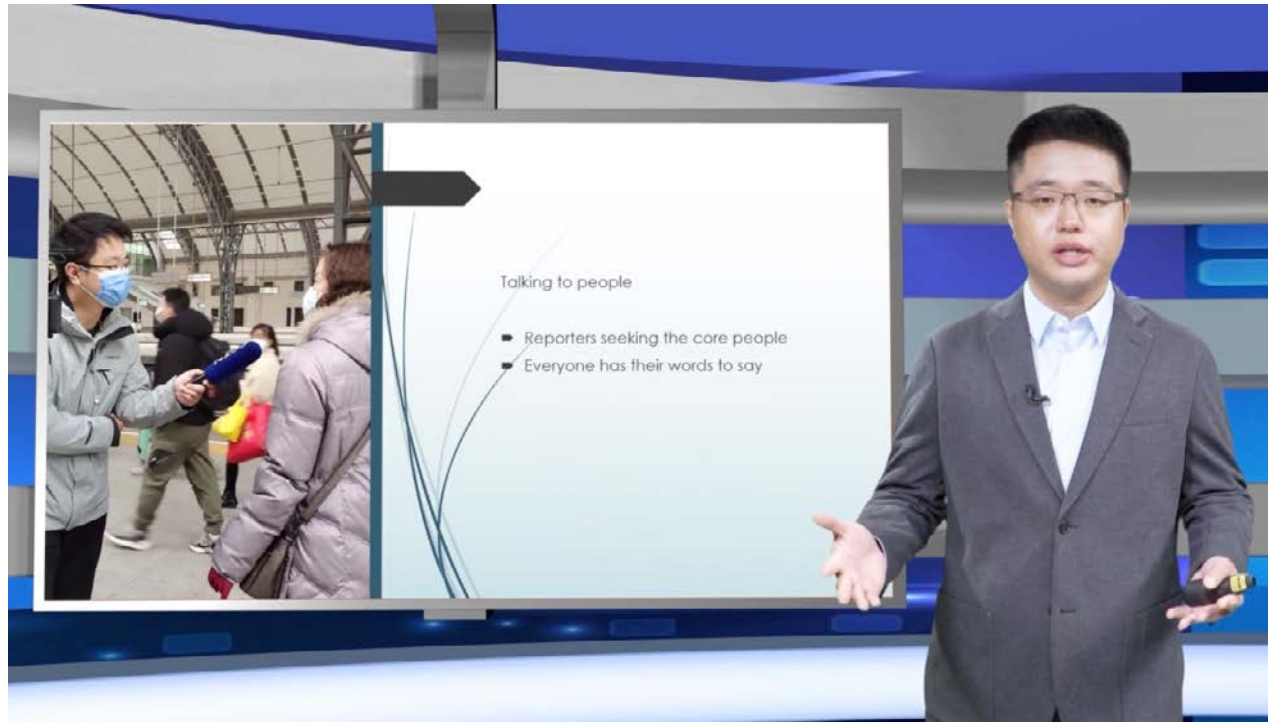
What challenges lie ahead and how are you preparing for them?

The situation can only get much worse in China because in addition to traditional censorship, Chinese authorities will soon use machine learning to do this faster and better. Moreover, companies like Apple set a bad example. Not only do they censor information in China, but they also censor information around the world on behalf of the Chinese authorities. If other companies follow Apple's lead, it will be harder and harder for the public to access the information the Chinese authorities want to censor. Therefore, we are constantly trying to improve what we do from a technological standpoint, and we are also trying to convince customers, employees and stakeholders from such companies to put pressure on them to reject censorship requests from states, including of course China.



© GreatFire.org

A vision of society that forbids journalism



A CGTN journalist explains how to cover what is "really happening in Wuhan" – for example, interviewing a resident saying China has its "own understanding of human rights" to counter criticism from abroad.

© Capture d'écran BRNA / CCTV

The successful export of Beijing's media model

In April 2019, China established the Belt and Road News Network (BRNN), a media network chaired by *People's Daily* and gaining member organisations from all over the world, officially intended to "exchange information" on the Belt and Road Initiative, a hugely ambitious project launched by China in 2013 that outlines the construction of transport infrastructure linking China with more than 100 countries, representing nearly two-thirds of the world's population in the Middle East, Europe, and East Africa.

BRNN is not the first network of its kind. In 2016, the China International Television Corporation (CITVC) initiated the Belt and Road Media Community, a film and television media alliance composed of 133 organisations. The Belt and Road News Alliance (BRNA), led by CCTV Video News Agency (CCTV+), was launched in 2017, and its members include 74 media institutions – most of them involved in TV broadcast news – from 42 countries and regions.

Imposing its "talking points"

Through these organisations, China seeks to woo media outlets from all over the world and encourage them to promote the project internationally. As part of joint broadcasting and international co-production projects within the Belt and Road Media Community, TV programmes such as *The Silk Road Reborn*, *A Bite of China*, and *China's Mega Projects* were broadcast in more than 30 languages by 80 institutions from more than 20 countries.

The China Economic Information Service, a Xinhua subsidiary, signed an agreement in December 2017 with around 20 think tanks and media outlets in Europe to provide specialised Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) financial information targeted at investors. Participants included Deutsche Presse-Agentur (Germany), Class Editori (Italy), Le Soir (Belgium), Metro (United Kingdom), the Financial World (Spain), Open Communication (Spain), Tanjug News Agency (Serbia), and Athens News Agency (Greece).

The two media networks, BRNA and BRNN, also organise training sessions that enable the Party to convey its propaganda and state-affiliated media to disseminate their working methods. In BRNA statements, participants were "amazed" by China's tech industry and hailed China's "efficient efforts" in fighting Covid-19.

A special training course, the Dongfang Scholarship Programme, has also been created to instruct journalists on talking points specific to the project – in other words, the programme advises journalists in the countries involved in the project to "speak the same language" used in China's propaganda. The 26-day course in China is sponsored by state-owned *China Daily*, two Chinese universities, and the China Eastern Airlines Group.

A charm offensive

Beyond the Belt and Road Initiative, Beijing spares no effort in pleasing journalists from emerging countries in order to be understood or, if possible, admired by these influencers from all over the world. The visits by foreign journalists also benefit Beijing in another way: How the journalists describe their visits confers credibility on the Chinese state media and gives the ordinary citizen the impression that the entire world approves of the Communist Party's policies.

These exchange programmes are coordinated by press centres for each geographical region and are managed jointly by the China's Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Public Diplomacy Association. Undoubtedly, the most popular programme is one in which journalists from the Indian subcontinent, Southeast Asia, and Africa are invited for a ten-month, all-expenses-paid visit with the undisguised aim of generating favourable press coverage.

Inviting journalists on trips is not necessarily a discreditable practice. Many governments do so in an attempt to improve their image. But in China's case, the journalists are chosen not by their editors but by the Chinese embassy with the Party's approval – and something is demanded in return. The conditions are clear: They must promise to "tell the China story well" and even portray its authoritarian regime as a democracy and international peacemaker.

These guests are not, however, allowed to move around freely during their stay. The delegation of journalists from Turkey, Egypt, Afghanistan, Pakistan, and Bangladesh – all countries with a Muslim majority – that began a visit to the western Autonomous Region of Xinjiang on 10th January 2019 were not given the opportunity to freely verify whether one million Uyghur Muslims were being held in re-education camps in Xinjiang. Instead, the authorities took them to an exhibition dedicated to the "fight against terrorism".

"Made in China" media events

In addition to training sessions, China has also sought to promote its authoritarian vision of the news media by organising its own international events. In 2009, it created the World Media Summit, which – as its name fails to suggest – is entirely designed, organised, and funded by the Chinese state news agency Xinhua. The first summit had prestigious international partners: News Corp (USA), the Associated Press (USA), Thomson Reuters (UK), ITAR-TASS (Russia), Kyodo News (Japan), BBC (UK), Turner (USA), and Google News Corp. (USA).



The annual BRICS Media Summit, an opportunity for China to denounce the Western media hegemony and call for the correction of its “imbalances”.

© Greg Baker / AFP

The second summit, entitled “Meeting Challenges of the 21st Century” and held in Moscow in 2012, represented 213 international media organisations from 102 countries. The Qatari TV broadcaster *Al Jazeera* organised a third summit entitled “The Future of News and News Organisations” in Doha, the capital of Qatar, in March 2016 with 120 organisations and 100 media outlets represented. Held in countries that are authoritarian and reject press freedom, these summits provided China with an opportunity to promote its concepts of “positive reporting” and a “new world media order”. They also helped to legitimise Xinhua by allowing its leaders to debate on equal terms with international media with the reputation of producing objective, quality journalism.

Since 2016, China has also been organising the annual BRICS Media Summit for news organisations from the five emerging national economies known as the BRICS (Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa). They have allowed China to influence media regulations and practices in the four other countries, as well as to provide additional opportunities to denounce Western media hegemony and call for “imbalances” to be corrected.

IN FOCUS

Chinese state media spread around the world

Over the last decade, China has invested massively in developing media capable of reaching an international public. And it has succeeded: State-owned CGTN broadcasts TV programmes in more than 160 countries, and China Radio International broadcasts in 44 languages.

With its modern presentation, professional style, and impeccable diction, CGTN Africa, whose regional headquarters are based in Nairobi (Kenya), projects a sophisticated image comparable to CNN International. Notably, CGTN Africa is completely controlled by the Chinese state and, while claiming to show Africa’s true face to the world, the programme actually takes great care to bolster China’s image in Africa.

In December 2018, CGTN opened a similar production office in London with 90 locally hired employees. This branch will eventually produce programmes specifically designed for Europe, just as its bureaux in Washington, D.C. and Nairobi, which were opened simultaneously in 2012, do for the Americas and Africa. CGTN Europe will reinforce China Media Group, unofficially known as the “Voice of China”, a single umbrella organisation that combines state TV (CCTV and CGTN) and national and international radio broadcasters (China National Radio and China Radio International).

Over the past decade, the scale of China’s international media presence has increased dramatically. China Global Television Network now has six channels – five 24-hour TV news channels (in English, French, Arabic, Russian, and Chinese) and an English-language documentary channel. CGTN now has around 10,000 employees in a total of 70 bureaux, including production centres in London, Washington, D.C. and Nairobi, and broadcasts in more than 160 countries and regions. China Radio International (CRI) has also managed to reach the entire world, broadcasting in a record number of 44 languages from more than 70 stations abroad.

The Chinese print media are now also big-league players. English-language China Daily, which has special issues for the Americas, Europe, and Asia, claims to have a daily print run of 900,000 copies (almost half of the New York Times’ print run) and a combined total of 45 million readers. Since 2009, the Global Times has published an English-language edition with a print run of “only” 100,000 copies, but its website in ten languages claims to have around 15 million visitors a day. Even state news agency Xinhua, once mocked for its austerity, has gained significant growth abroad.

© CGTN Africa / YouTube Screenshot





The Chinese Communist Party is stepping up efforts to impose its narrative abroad, including in Serbia, where a pro-government tabloid is thanking "big brother Xi Jinping".

© Andrej Isakovic / AFP

Imposing the “China Story”

As condemnations regarding the repression in the Xinjiang Autonomous Region mount around the world, the Beijing regime [does not skimp on resources](#) to create a diversion, especially on social networks. A joint [investigation](#) by the *New York Times* and *ProPublica* in June 2021 exposed how the Party orchestrated a propaganda campaign staging, in more than 3,000 YouTube videos, Uyghur people portraying their lives in the Xinjiang Autonomous Region in a suspiciously positive light, especially since these videos contain similarities in terms of production and script.

For the regime, these campaigns are part of an effort to force the world to "tell China's story well" in accordance with the [narrative](#) promoted by President Xi Jinping. In an interview published by *People's Daily* in 2013, Li Congjun, the former head of state news agency Xinhua, found that “global opinions are still dominated by Western media outlets” and advocated the creation of a “new world media order” to redress the imbalance in favour of his country.

Trojan horse strategy

In an effort to reach a broader public internationally, Beijing has also begun implementing an ambitious programme of strategically buying into foreign media. This acquisition policy is coordinated by the United Front Work Department, a Chinese Communist Party branch that oversees financial transfers to foreign media outlets. According to a *Bloomberg News* report in April 2018, China has invested around US \$3.3 billion in acquiring shares in various European media over the last decade, about 1% of its entire investment in the continent.

The regime is also investing heavily in the publication of editorial supplements in major international newspapers. The readers of the *Wall Street Journal* (USA), the *Daily Telegraph* (United Kingdom), *Le Figaro* (France), *Handelsblatt* (Germany), *Rossiyskaya Gazeta* (Russia), and *Mainichi Shimbun* (Japan) have gradually become accustomed inoffensive-looking free supplements from *China Watch*, a Chinese think tank and publication, that are published at regular intervals in their favourite newspapers. Written by *China Daily* and reasonably enjoyable reads, these supplements are nonetheless Trojan horses that enable Beijing to establish its propaganda in the living rooms of elites. As the price China pays for such an insert in a leading daily paper can reach about US \$250,000, the financial gain these media experience exposes them to the possibility of being pressured by Beijing.

Controlling the Chinese diaspora

Beijing's influence reaches especially far in the Chinese-language media outside China. Indeed, the 50 million overseas Chinese, half of whom are in Asia, were traditionally very critical of China's communist regime. After the Tiananmen massacre on 4th June 1989, which triggered a wave of outrage in the diaspora media, Beijing realised that they posed an obstacle to its image-control strategy and set out to purchase these media, one by one, while at the same time developing new outlets of its own.

In Thailand, which has the world's largest Chinese diaspora community (with 9 million people), the Chinese-language media was once fiercely anti-communist, but they too have changed their tone. Sing Sian Yer Pao, founded in 1950 and what is now Thailand's leading Chinese-language daily publication, switched from traditional Chinese characters to the simplified ones used in China and began a partnership with China's Nanfang Mediagroup.

According to a report by British newspaper The Economist published on 23rd September 2021, the Chinese messaging application WeChat, which is popular among Chinese-speaking first generation immigrants, is one of the main news dissemination channels in Chinese language. In the United States, a [study](#) by the Columbia University School of Journalism in April 2018 had revealed that many instances of far-right misinformation and conspiracy theories were circulating on the US version of WeChat. The application also [tracks](#) international users' conversations and content the Party would deem sensitive, albeit to a lesser extent than on the domestic version.

Chinese-style “sharp power”

China's diplomatic missions are another source of pressure against freedom of information in democracies. Some of China's ambassadors have no qualms about openly denigrating journalists or demanding the right of reply when they think they can claim – and they often do – that a newspaper article has “hurt the feelings of 1.4 billion Chinese people”. Such declarations about the feelings of Chinese citizens are more than a slight exaggeration given that a crushing majority of Chinese internet users have no access to foreign media because of censorship.

In a new article published on 25th October 2021 on the Chinese Embassy's website, Ambassador in Paris Lu Shaye, a repeat offender infamous for his diatribes against the media, attacked the Asia correspondent of the daily newspaper *Le Figaro*, **Sébastien Falletti**, who in an article published on 19th October allegedly “puffed up with lies and divagation”, “twisted the neck of reality”, and was “complacent” in regards to the Taiwanese government. The ambassador also grazed Le Monde's correspondent in Beijing, **Frédéric Lemaître**, implying that his writings are most often fabricated and shamelessly urging French media outlets in general to “scrupulously observe ethics” and “respect the facts”.

Wolf-warrior diplomacy

Embassies also pressure venues to cancel events that threaten information control in China. In Germany, a [lecture](#) about a book on Xi Jinping written by two German journalists, **Stefan Aust** and **Adrian Geiges**, that was scheduled to take place at the University of Duisburg-Essen's Confucius Institute on 27th October 2021, was cancelled after personal intervention from the consul general of China to Düsseldorf. In Italy, the Chinese Embassy in Rome tried to cancel Chinese-Australian caricaturist **Badiucao**'s exhibition that is taking place in Brescia (northern Italy) between November 2021 and February 2022. The city did not give in to Chinese pressure and decided to keep the event.

Since the beginning of the Hong Kong pro-democracy protests in 2019, Chinese diplomats have invested in foreign social media despite them being banned in China; according to a joint study by the Associated Press and US think tank Atlantic Council's Digital Forensic Research Lab, Chinese diplomatic accounts have more than tripled on Twitter and more than doubled on Facebook in this period. This trend exists alongside an increase in aggressive or even insulting responses to foreign critics, a trait that has been dubbed “wolf-warrior diplomacy” in reference to a patriotic Chinese action movie in which the protagonist vanquishes foreign “bad guys”.

Disinformation campaigns

This novel use of foreign social media also allows China to increase its disinformation capabilities. Though Taiwan and, to a lesser extent, countries with a large population of ethnic Chinese have been primary targets, Chinese disinformation campaigns started to go global as the world battled with the Covid-19 pandemic in 2020. One recurrent fake news source says that the virus is actually a bioweapon engineered by the US military in a lab at Fort Detrick, Maryland, and introduced during the Military World Games in Wuhan in October 2019.

On 11th March 2020, China's Ministry of Foreign Affairs spokesman Zhao Lijian posted a series of tweets arguing the American origin of Covid-19. According to the same study by the Associated Press and the Digital Forensic Research Lab, Zhao's thread had been quoted nearly 100,000 times in at least 54 languages over the next six weeks. The automatic and coordinated use of fake and hijacked accounts, a practice cybersecurity firm Graphika has dubbed as "spamouflage", served to amplify Chinese disinformation.

Though such engagement was met uncritically in Russia, Iran, and the Philippines, with politicians amplifying these claims, other countries and regional entities such as Japan and the European Union explicitly pointed at China as a source of disinformation. In June 2020, Twitter announced the deletion of around 170,000 Chinese accounts after finding they were related to Beijing's state influence campaigns.

Trolls and influencers

The "Little Pinks", voluntary nationalist trolls who attack China critics, also operate on foreign social media. One of their first major cyber harassment campaigns took place in January 2016 at the time of Tsai Ing-wen's election as Taiwan's president; many Chinese internet users posted aggressive comments and memes on the new president-elect's Facebook page.

The Chinese regime also resorts to influencers to spread its propaganda. In Egypt, an Arabic-speaking Chinese influencer named Faihaa Wang, who according to *Global Times* is linked to China Media Group, uses the Party's talking points and fake news to defend the central government's policies in the Xinjiang Autonomous Region. In 2020, other foreign vloggers – among them British expatriates Barrie Jones, Jason Lightfoot, and Lee and Oli Barrett – began posting videos on their YouTube channels to defend Beijing's policies in the Xinjiang Autonomous Region and China's "good handling" of the Covid-19 crisis. These vloggers, who describe themselves as "China-lovers", accuse Western media outlets of plotting to "try and destabilise China".



Pro-China British vlogger Jason Lightfoot denounces the Western media's "bullshit" reporting on repression in the Xinjiang Autonomous Region.

© CGTN / YouTube
Screenshot

IN FOCUS

TikTok: Banned in China but infiltrated by Beijing

The Chinese video-sharing application TikTok, with a billion users worldwide but banned in China, is suspected of being part of the Beijing regime's censorship and surveillance operations.

Launched in 2017 by the Chinese company ByteDance, the social network TikTok, specialising in the sharing of short videos, has had tremendous success worldwide, exceeding two billion downloads and one billion active users per month by September 2021. The application, which targets 18-25 year olds, is accessible in more than 150 countries... but not in China, where the public has to settle for its twin sister Douyin, a platform limited to the national territory.

An investigation published on 25th June 2021 by the CNBC television channel showed that user data, although stored in the United States and Singapore, was nevertheless accessible to the Chinese parent company, which is confirmed by the confidentiality clauses of the application. The company ByteDance, being subject to Chinese law, would therefore have no choice but to provide this data to the Chinese authorities if they requested so, although it claims to have never received such a request.

In September 2019, as the application was accused of censoring discussions on pro-democracy protests in Hong Kong. British newspaper The Guardian revealed the existence of guidelines to censor content deemed sensitive by the Beijing regime, including the Tiananmen massacre, Tibet independence, and the Falun Gong movement. The social media platform responded to the newspaper and stated that these guidelines had been retired and it was taking a more localised approach.

In November of the same year, TikTok suspended **Feroza Aziz's** account after the Afghan-American teenager had posted a makeup tutorial in which she criticised the repression of the Uyghur ethnic minority in China and urged her followers to inform themselves on the issue. The platform initially invoked a breach of rules on terrorism-related content before acknowledging its mistakes and apologising to Feroza Aziz.

In 2020, suspecting TikTok of posing risks to "national security", the administration of former US President Donald Trump had ordered the platform to be banned if it could not find a US buyer. Although the new president, Joe Biden, has since revoked the decision, he has announced the implementation of measures to assess security risks from foreign applications such as TikTok.



© Olivier Douliery / AFP

Democracies organising the fight against propaganda

In democratic countries, regulation enshrines the principle of information media's independence and pluralism, that media can broadcast without government interference, and opens the domestic media arena to foreign media. Unfortunately, authoritarian governments, including China, routinely exploit this system to broadcast content that violates journalism's most basic principles.

The asymmetry between open democratic countries with journalistic freedom and closed authoritarian countries that control information and export propaganda undermines journalism and, more broadly, the reliability of information, which requires freedom, independence, and pluralism. This asymmetry gives dictatorships a competitive advantage over democracies without serving the cause of journalism, which dictatorships block domestically while exporting their propaganda abroad.

To sanction illegal practices

To protect themselves, democracies try to sanction violations of broadcasting rules. On 18th November 2020, Taiwan's independent regulator, the National Communications Commission (NCC), denied the broadcasting licence renewal of news channel CTi TV for repeated violations of its obligation to respect journalism ethics. The channel, owned by pro-Chinese Want Want China Times Media Group, had already been warned in 2014 but made no significant change to its practices.

In February 2021, the British media regulator Office of Communications (Ofcom) revoked the license of the CGTN channel [for similar reasons](#), but the group continues to broadcast in Europe from the French satellite Eutelsat.

To guarantee equal treatment

Following this case, RSF called on democracies to [guarantee equal treatment](#) in the media market by ensuring that all media, whatever their country of origin and broadcasting channel (satellite, digital, etc.) are subjected to the same obligations, obligations concerning in particular the honesty, independence, and pluralism of information and respect for human dignity under penalty of sanction which may go as far as refusal or withdrawal of the authorisation to broadcast. For the system to be effective, satellite and digital operators must be held responsible and verify that the channels they distribute comply with these legal obligations.

RSF also called for the establishment of an international system of reciprocity based on the universal principles of freedom of opinion and expression, which would make the opening of democratic countries' domestic media space conditional upon the reciprocal opening of the digital space, the absence of barriers and censorship to entry, and the respect of international standards of freedom of expression and information.

IN FOCUS



© Safeguard Defenders

CGTN loses UK licence due to ethical breaches

In 2021, the British communications regulatory authority (Ofcom) revoked the license of Chinese state-owned audiovisual group CGTN after four cases of ethical breaches, but the group is still broadcasting its propaganda in Europe and the rest of the world.

In February 2021, the Office of Communications (Ofcom), the United Kingdom's official communications regulator, revoked the broadcasting license of the Chinese state-owned audiovisual group *China Global Television Network* (CGTN) in the UK, justifying this decision on the grounds that the group and its programmes are "ultimately controlled by the Chinese Communist Party". Later in the year, Ofcom also sanctioned the group four times for "serious and repeated breaches" of Ofcom Broadcasting Code, fining it a total equivalent to US \$570,000.

Ofcom accuses CGTN of multiple ethical breaches in previous years, including a breach of "impartiality" rules in coverage of the Hong Kong protests in 2019 and the broadcasting, between 2013 and 2019, of [forced confessions](#) from the Swedish publisher **Gui Minhai**, former journalist **Peter Humphrey**, and British consulate employee in Hong Kong **Simon Cheng**, treatment that Ofcom describes as "unfair" and as "infringement of privacy". In retaliation, the regime [banned the British public broadcaster BBC](#) from broadcasting in China, claiming that its programmes "undermined China's national interests" - which had a very limited impact, as the presence of international channels in China was already limited to international hotels and residential buildings for expatriates.

CGTN is nevertheless continuing to broadcast in Europe, as France's High Council for Broadcasting (CSA) has ruled that the channel "can be freely broadcast, without prior formality" under the Council of Europe's European Convention on Transfrontier Television. Following this announcement, the German regulatory authority, which had initially banned CGTN following the UK's decision, was forced to backtrack. CGTN, taking advantage of the French decision, was even able to resume broadcasting in the UK.

The legal battle against Chinese propaganda in democracies has only just begun. Just days after the CSA's announcement, victims of forced confessions urged the satellite broadcaster Eutelsat to stop broadcasting CGTN, and new complaints were filed on 5th April 2021 against the channel with the CSA and its US counterpart, the Federal Communications Commission, over CGTN's broadcast of a Uyghur child's forced confession in March 2021. In Australia, the television group SBS also decided in May 2021 to suspend the broadcasting of CGTN programmes after receiving a complaint from the NGO Safeguard Defenders about past broadcasts of forced confessions.

4

RSF'S APPEALS AND RECOMMENDATIONS



- RSF calls on the Chinese authorities to respect the freedom of the press outlined in the Constitution of the People's Republic of China and to release all detained journalists and press freedom defenders.
- RSF calls on governments to ensure that Chinese media broadcasting in their territories is subject to the same rules as media based in their territories and to make the access of Chinese media to their public space conditional upon the reciprocal opening of the Chinese digital space and the media market without barriers and censorship.
- RSF recommends that journalists avoid downloading applications that could allow the Chinese authorities to monitor them, and to be careful not to unintentionally include elements or terms of Chinese propaganda in their reports.
- RSF recommends to media outlets, publishers and social networks to denounce editorial interference and pressures from the Chinese regime, to refuse surveillance, censorship and propaganda broadcasting, and to continue investigating Beijing's attacks on press freedom.

Appeals to the Chinese authorities

- Immediately release all professional and non-professional journalists detained in connection with their reporting, and stop abducting, arresting, detaining, torturing, mistreating, searching, and harassing journalists and defenders of freely reported news and information, in compliance with the constitution of the People's Republic of China, which prohibits “unlawful detention,” guarantees “personal dignity” and declares the homes of citizens to be “inviolable” (Articles 37, 38 and 39).
- Respect press freedom and the right to information both domestically and internationally.
- Ratify the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, which guarantees the right to freedom of opinion and expression in its Article 19.
- Ensure the independence of state and privately-owned media in accordance with Article 35 of the Constitution of the People's Republic of China, which guarantees “freedom of speech [and] of the press”.
- End the system of online censorship and surveillance of journalists, which constitutes a flagrant violation of the right of Chinese citizens to the freedom and privacy of correspondence guaranteed by Article 40 of the Constitution of the People's Republic of China.
- Stop blocking and censoring the dissemination of foreign media content in China.
- Do not impede the work of foreign reporters in China and provide them with accreditation in an open and transparent manner.

Appeals to governments and institutions

- Convey the aforementioned recommendations to the Chinese authorities.
- Demand that the Chinese authorities stop harassing journalists, media outlets, publishers and academics based abroad.
- Require Chinese media broadcasting in third-party countries to be completely transparent about their shareholders and their sources of funding, including advertising.
- Guarantee equal treatment for all audiovisual media, whatever their broadcasting channels and their country of origin: Subject Chinese audiovisual media that broadcast in democracies (especially satellite television) to the same rules as media based in these democracies, particularly rules relating to honesty, independence and pluralism of information, and respect for the dignity of persons.
- Encourage and support the presence of independent Chinese-language media, especially in countries with a large ethnic Chinese diaspora.
- Develop programmes that educate citizens about the media, helping them to detect disinformation campaigns and obtain their information from pluralistic and independent journalistic sources.

Recommendations for journalists

- As far as possible, avoid using technological resources that entail a risk of censorship or surveillance by the Chinese authorities, either because they were developed by or are operated by a company subject to Chinese regulation (such as WeChat, Baidu, TikTok), or because user data is stored in servers accessible to the Chinese authorities (such as iCloud China).
- If using these resources is absolutely necessary, connect from a dedicated computer or smartphone that is separate from your usual work environment. Do not store, even temporarily, passwords or information that could endanger you or your sources. Do not trust claims by operators that data passing through their servers in China is encrypted or immediately deleted. To protect Chinese sources, communication via end-to-end encrypted messengers which do not require the storage of a telephone number is recommended (e.g. Threema).
- When communicating and publishing via Chinese platforms, monitor technical data for potential manipulation; and publish parallel content on international platforms.
- When conducting research in China, a suitable VPN should be installed before departure, for example, a company-owned VPN or a reliable paid version. VPN tunnels can provide access to blocked services and protect privacy to some extent during online research. However, a VPN does not protect the content of communications exchanged on Chinese platforms/services. An individual consultation with a digital security expert is advisable.
- In journalists and correspondents' “home bases”, pay attention to the presence and development of media of Chinese origin, particularly their publishing and investment activities. Notify RSF of any changes in the editorial policy of local media linked to China.
- Notify RSF of any abuses you see in the course of your reporting and in your country's media (pressure, threats, harassment, suspected self-censorship or suspected corruption) so that we can, if necessary, investigate.
- When referring to China, take care to avoid using expressions designed to conceal certain realities. For example, refer to the repression in Xinjiang rather than the “fight against terrorism”, or to the Tiananmen massacre rather than the Tiananmen “events”.
- Do not cooperate with media outlets that relay Chinese Communist Party propaganda and, if you are invited to China as a journalist, think about what may be asked of you in return.
- When participating in events such as media conferences organised by China, journalists and media outlets should be aware that Chinese representatives and officials will use these events as a platform for propaganda. By studying Chinese narratives and background information in advance, journalists can increase their awareness of propaganda strategies and prepare for critical discussions.

Recommendations for media outlets, publishers, and social networks

- Do everything possible to prevent the risk of external pressure, whether political or economic, and denounce any editorial interference you experience.
- Refuse all censorship and surveillance requests.
- Refuse to disseminate propaganda content.
- Continue to investigate and expose Beijing's censorship, propaganda, media acquisitions, harassment of journalists, and other attacks on press freedom.
- Comply with the principles of the [International Declaration for Information and Democracy](#), which stipulate that online platforms, as structuring entities of information and communication space, follow principles of accountability and responsibility, neutrality, promotion of reliable information, pluralism and serendipity, transparency to inspection, and vigilance.

IN FOCUS

“Collateral Freedom”, mirror websites to bypass censorship

RSF's [#CollateralFreedom](#) operation circumvents internet censorship using a strategy that “mirrors”, or duplicates, censored websites created on international servers belonging to the world's internet giants.

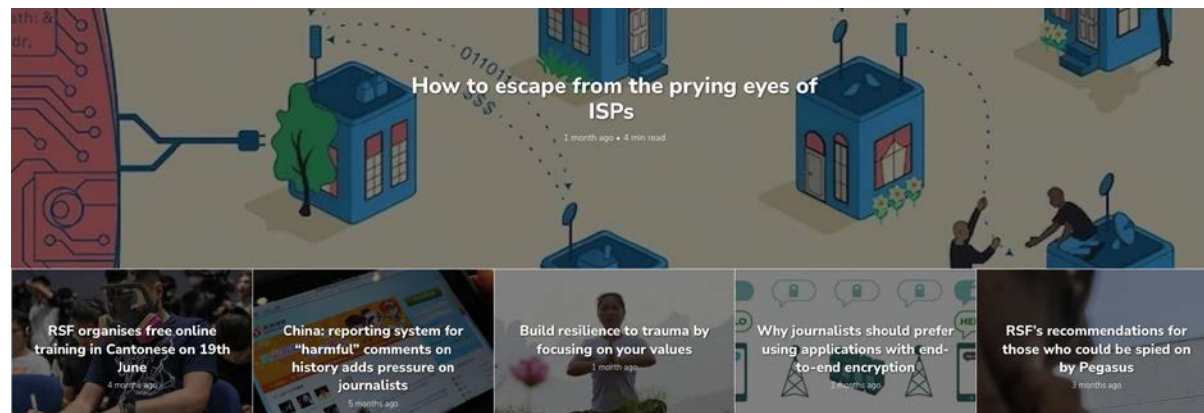
If a country wants to block access to the mirrors, it must also deprive itself access to all the sites and services hosted on these servers, which would inflict significant “collateral damage” on its own economy.

In the case of China, the project allows the mirroring of the following websites: *Tibet Post International*, *Mingjing News*, *China Digital Times*, *Civil Rights and Livelihood Watch*, and *Weiquanwang*.



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RSF launches a resource platform on journalist safety



© Reporters Without Borders (RSF)

Reporters Without Borders (RSF) has launched a resource platform on physical safety, cybersecurity, and professional practices for journalists.

In the wake of the Pegasus revelation, it has never been more relevant for journalists to protect themselves and their sources. In order to assist them, Reporters Without Borders (RSF) has launched a resource platform on its website on physical safety, cybersecurity and professional practices for journalists. RSF launched an information and self-training platform for journalists covering Covid-19 reporting and broader issues such as physical safety, cybersecurity, legal information and mental health, currently available in English and Chinese at training.rsf.org.

The platform boasts comprehensive information on Israeli spyware, Pegasus, which was reportedly used to spy on 50,000 mobile phones, including those of at least 180 journalists. It also features video recordings from a series of training sessions held by RSF as well as an electronic version of the RSF Safety Guide for Journalists published in cooperation with UNESCO.

RSF has been operating safety training programs for nearly a decade and has reached more than 1,800 journalists from around the world. In addition to training, RSF also offers rapid response assistance which aims to provide protection and support to threatened media and harassed or detained journalists.

RSF's Safety Guide for Journalists

RSF's Safety Guide for Journalists, a comprehensive handbook for those working in high-risk environments (available at training.rsf.org) aims to provide practical advice for all stages of reporting. By utilising this manual, reporters can assess risk and be better prepared for unexpected circumstances during their assignments. Including:

- Risk evaluation
- Medication and vaccinations
- Packing a travel kit
- Traveling within combat zones or high-risk areas
- Preparing for attacks, ambushes and other threats
- Digital safety best practices
- Mental and physical self-care



RSF REPORT

China's Pursuit of a New World Media Order

In a previous report entitled *China's Pursuit of a New World Media Order*, published in 2019, RSF denounced the manoeuvres undertaken by the Beijing regime to export its repressive vision of information.

To impose a "new world media order" in which journalism is synonymous with state propaganda, China is lavishing money on modernising its international broadcasting apparatus, investing in foreign media outlets, and inviting journalists from developing countries to "train" in China.

Through its Belt and Road Initiative international development project, the regime also encourages authoritarian governments to strengthen control over the media and the internet and provides them with the necessary technical and regulatory means. This expansion, the scale of which is still hard to gauge, poses a direct threat to journalism and democracy around the world.



© Reporters Without Borders (RSF)

The report can be downloaded from the RSF website (in French, English, Traditional Chinese and Simplified Chinese) or through this link: <https://bit.ly/3BxFH2N>

GLOSSARY

THE INFORMATION CONTROL APPARATUS IN CHINA



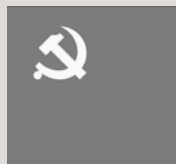
Xi Jinping

General secretary of the Chinese Communist Party and chairman of the Central Military Commission since November 2012, president of the People's Republic of China since March 2013. Xi Jinping has had the Chinese constitution amended to incorporate elements of his "Thought" and to rule the country without a term limit.



Carrie Lam

Lam, appointed in July 2017 as the Hong Kong chief executive, has consistently been defending the Chinese regime's censorship policies in the name of "patriotism". During the 2019 pro-democracy protests, Lam deliberately ignored the police violence on reporters. Under her term, at least 12 journalists and press freedom defenders have been prosecuted for crimes against the state, ten of whom are detained to date.



Propaganda Department

Sometimes translated as "Publicity Department", this Chinese Communist Party organ implements propaganda guidelines adopted by the Central Committee's Leading Group for Propaganda and Ideology Work. Since 2018, it has direct authority on press and publication activities.



State Council Information Office

This administrative office under the Central Propaganda Department's control that drafts the official "positive version" of events that the media must follow and decides what arguments should be used to rebut stories in the international media that contradict the official propaganda line.



United Front Work Department

This opaque branch of the Chinese Communist Party oversees financial transfers to foreign media (including Chinese-language media), whether for the purpose of buying advertising or acquiring shares in these media.



Cyberspace Administration of China

Created in 2014, this agency implements policies regarding internet issues formulated by the Central Cyberspace Affairs Commission, which is headed by Xi Jinping himself. The CAC oversees censorship, surveillance and propaganda measures on the internet.



Xinhua News Agency

Closely controlled by the Party, the state news agency has more than 10,000 employees, publishes in ten languages (Chinese, Japanese, Korean, Arabic, Russian, English, German, French, Spanish and Portuguese) and has 162 international bureaux, including regional centres in Hong Kong, Cairo, Nairobi, New York, Mexico City and Brussels.



China Media Group (CMG)

Officially unveiled in March 2018 and unofficially known as "Voice of China", this international entity is designed to combine the productive and promotional capacities of the entire state radio and TV broadcasting apparatus with the aim of enhancing global propaganda impact.



China Global Television Network (CGTN)

Formerly known as CCTV-9 and CCTV News, this state-owned cable TV news service produces programmes in 160 countries, which are broadcast in five languages (Chinese, English, Arabic, French and Russian). CGTN has more than 10,000 employees in 70 bureaux and three production centres (in London, Washington, D.C. and Nairobi).



China Radio International (CRI)

Founded in 1941, this state-owned international radio broadcaster draws its strength from its cooperation with China National Radio, with which it pools resources. CRI broadcasts in 44 languages from more than 70 foreign radio stations in the China International Broadcasting Network (CIBN).



China Daily

Founded in 1981 and published solely in English, this state-owned daily newspaper claims a print run of 900,000 copies and a total of 150 million readers (print and online versions combined). Its advertorial supplement, which is targeted at international opinion leaders, is inserted into prestigious newspapers worldwide, with an estimated circulation of 4 million.



People's Daily

Founded in 1948, this daily newspaper is the Party's official propaganda organ, and its editorials are often drafted by the Central Propaganda Department. The paper claims to have a daily circulation of 3 million copies per day. Other than Mandarin Chinese, its website is produced in 16 foreign and ethnic minority languages.



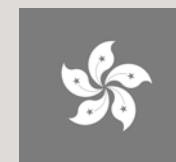
Global Times

An ultra-nationalist tabloid established by People's Daily in 1993 to comment on international news. Its Chinese-language edition has a print run of 1 million copies, and its English-language version, launched in 2009, has a print run of 100,000. Its website, which is produced in 10 languages, claims to have 15 million visits a day.



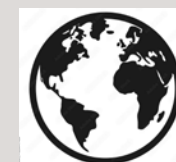
China International Publishing Group

Founded in 1949, CIPG is China's biggest foreign-language publishing house. It publishes in more than ten languages and has 20 international offices. Its publications include Beijing Review, which was launched in 1958 and is China's only national English-language news magazine.



Leading Hong Kong media

Certain Chinese-language media outlets in Hong Kong under Beijing's partial or full control, such as Ta Kung Pao, Wen Wei Po and Phoenix TV, play an important role in disseminating Chinese propaganda in overseas Chinese communities. When the Chinese e-commerce giant Alibaba acquired the English-language South China Morning Post newspaper in 2016, many saw Beijing's influence behind the acquisition.



Chinese diaspora media

Beijing has gained control of most of the leading Chinese diaspora media. Newspapers such as New Zealand's *Chinese Herald* and Australia's *Pacific Times*, which used to be independent and critical of the Chinese regime, are now its propaganda mouthpieces. China has also developed its own media outlets such as *Qiaobao* (China Press) in the United States to help disseminate its viewpoint in the diaspora.



Chinese embassies

China's embassies are notorious for trying to intimidate journalists and academics whose work displeases them. The ambassadors themselves do not hesitate to publicly criticise any "misinterpretation" of China's actions and to harass their authors, including on foreign social media.



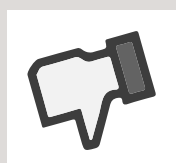
Confucius Institutes

Launched in 2004 with funding from the culture and education ministries and the Party's Central Propaganda Department, the network of Confucius Institutes is tasked with disseminating Chinese language and culture and consists of more than 500 institutes in 154 countries. A growing number of universities have had to terminate their partnerships with these institutes because they try to impose the Party's official version of history and politics.



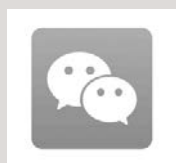
"50 Cent Army"

These online commentators, initially paid by the number of posts they made, hence their name, are responsible for relaying the regime's propaganda under the illusion of representing the opinions of ordinary Chinese citizens.



"Little Pinks"

Unlike the "50 Cent Army" of trolls who are hired to mass produce pro-regime online comments, these nationalist trolls hit back at China critics on both Chinese and foreign platforms on their own initiative. The group gets its name from the colour of its website's front page as well as the erroneous belief that most of its members are young women.



WeChat (messaging app)

Created by Chinese tech giant Tencent in 2011, this is China's largest social media platform, with more than 1 billion regular users worldwide. The data collected by WeChat, which is not encrypted and is managed by servers in China, constitutes a significant censorship, influence and surveillance resource for the Chinese regime.



Sina Weibo (microblogging site)

Launched in 2009, this "Chinese Twitter" is China's second-biggest social network, with more than 550 million active users. The company employs censors to flag and block content and keywords likely to be viewed as "harmful" by the Party.



Baidu (search engine)

Created in 1999, this search engine dominates the Chinese search engine market, ranks second only to Google internationally, and offers a range of similar parallel services including a duplication of the online encyclopaedia Wikipedia. Although notorious for collaborating with state censorship and propaganda, it has been trying to develop internationally for the last decade, so far with little success.



Huawei (telecommunication group)

Founded in 1987 by a former Chinese military officer, the world's leading telecommunications provider, like other Chinese tech companies, takes part in perfecting China's censorship and surveillance capabilities and assists authoritarian regimes in deploying such technologies.



World Internet Conference (WIC)

Launched in 2014 and held annually in Wuzhen, Zhejiang province, this event invites the international community to join together in building "a shared future in cyberspace". Through promoting the concept of "cyber-sovereignty", China uses these conferences to export its censorship and surveillance practices.



World Media Summit (WMS)

Launched by China in 2009, these summits invite the entire world's media to unite in "meeting the challenges of the 21st century". China uses these summits to denounce Western media hegemony and call for the imbalance to be addressed.



BRICS Media Forum (BMF)

Launched in 2016, this forum is an annual gathering of media representatives from the five emerging national economies known as the BRICS (Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa). These summits provide China with an opportunity to influence media regulations and practices in the other four countries.



Front cover illustrated by Badiucao

The cover illustration of this report was designed by Chinese artist [Badiucao](#), whose works confront a variety of Chinese social and political issues head-on and challenge the regime's censorship. Badiucao has worked on a variety of projects with the BBC, CNN, *China Digital Times*, and Freedom House, and his work has been exhibited in Australia, Italy and the United States. In 2018, his Hong Kong exhibition was cancelled at the last-minute following threats from Beijing. In 2021, he held a solo exhibition in Brescia, Italy, despite the Chinese Embassy's pressure on the city government.



REPORTERS WITHOUT BORDERS (RSF) promotes and defends freedom, pluralism and independence of journalism throughout the world. Based in Paris, the organisation holds a consultative status at the United Nations and UNESCO and has fourteen international bureaux and correspondents in 130 countries.

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