New Challenges to China’s Media

Three events in China caught the eyes of the world in 2008. They were the violent protests against Chinese rule in Tibet that erupted in March, the tragic earthquake in Sichuan in May that killed an estimated 70,000 people including thousands of school children who were trapped in buildings that some said collapsed because of shoddy corruption, and the Beijing Olympics in August where the performances and the Olympic city itself dazzled a huge worldwide audience. Journalists in China and throughout the world rushed to cover these events, sometimes blocked, sometimes assisted, but always closely watched by Chinese authorities. Media reporting of these major stories and the government’s reactions to them tell us much about media-government relationships in China today.

Protests in Tibet

In mid-March, Tibetan rioters attacked Han Chinese in Lhasa. For weeks, Chinese security forces tried in vain to extinguish the continuing protests. Chinese officials and state news media blasted the foreign media as biased against China, castigated the Dalai Lama as a terrorist “jackal,” and called for a “people’s war” to fight separatism in Tibet. The Communist Party seemed concerned with rallying domestic opinion by appealing to the deep strain of nationalism in Chinese society. Playing to national pride and national insecurity, the party used censorship and propaganda to position itself as defender of the motherland and at the same time block any examination of Tibetan grievances or its own performance in the crisis. Most vocal Chinese and the domestic media supported the government’s stance.
US journalist Nicholas Kristof said it would be convenient if we could
denounce the crackdown in Tibet as the unpopular action of a dictatorial
government. But it wasn’t. It was the popular action of a dictatorial
government and many ordinary Chinese think the government acted too
wimpishly, showing too much restraint toward “thugs” and “rioters.” China
and the United States, Kristof said, clash mostly because of competing
narratives. “To Americans, Tibet fits neatly in a framework of human rights
and colonialism. To Chinese steeped in 150 years of ‘guochi’ or national
humiliation by foreigners, the current episode is one more effort by
imperialistic foreigners to tear China apart or hold it back.”1 Even Chinese
students overseas and some non-Chinese supported the government’s
stand in Tibet and accused the Western media of exaggerating and distort-
ing the Tibetan situation.2 The Chinese state media had inundated the
public with many reports from Lhasa about the suffering of Han Chinese
merchants and the brutal deaths of Chinese at the hands of rioters. The
Tibetan crisis touched the raw nerve of separatism at the core of Chinese
nationalism and China failed to provide an even-handed report abroad about
Tibet. C.-C. Lee points out the Party leaders will use the media to rally
Chinese nationalism against any perceived challenge to China’s national
sovereignty or international status and that this is standard practice for
China’s media.3

Nevertheless, even the media coverage of the sensitive Tibet situation
suggests that there is there is more media freedom in China today than in
the old days of Mao Zedong. Even Xinhua, the tightly controlled official
Chinese news agency, admitted in its reports that despite police efforts
the riots had spread to Tibetan-inhabited areas in China outside Tibet.4
Personal freedom to criticize the government has also grown considerably.
Chinese people can express opinions that diverge from the party line and
even something as sensitive as the Tibet policy in private conversations.
However, the Communist Party, which maintains a monopoly of power,
makes it clear that certain views cannot be publicly expressed. Views ques-
tioning the official policy on Tibet certainly fall into that category.

Earthquake in Sichuan

Chinese authorities were simply unable to control media coverage of the
Sichuan earthquake in contrast with its tight control of media reports of
the riots in Tibet just two months earlier. Within 3 hours of the Sichuan
earthquake the Central Propaganda Department in Beijing ordered newspapers not to send reporters to the quake areas. Some papers, including the *Oriental Morning Post* of Shanghai, simply ignored the order and by next morning had front-page earthquake coverage from Sichuan including photographs. Reporters from other newspapers soon joined in to fully report the earthquake. Bloggers were also sending photos and information from all over the earthquake area, ignoring any restrictions. One complicating fact was that only on May 1 the government had put forth new rules that required authorities to make public any information involving the “vital interests of citizens.” The Propaganda Department withdrew its restrictive order within a day. Originally apprehensive reporters soon found that they were free to move around and write whatever they believed was important.

One reason government authorities eased off media controls was that media reports were almost universal in their praise for the speed and efficiency of government rescue efforts. The media had been faster and certainly provided major coverage of the earthquake, but their content reflected government policy. It focused on the relief efforts and did not go into criticisms of local officials and school construction. Shi Hong, network news coordinator for the Shanghai Media group, explained, “The executives have instructed us to go deep into the front line and send back vivid images of Shanghai people participating in the damage relief up there.”

One thing the Sichuan earthquake did was at least temporarily silence critics of China’s human rights record. The deaths of nearly 70,000 people from the earthquake brought a wave of sympathy for China from overseas and forced some critics of the Beijing government’s policies, including its Tibet policies, to think twice about their tactics.

Among the images that showed a new face of China were media photos of Premier Wen Jiabao visiting earthquake sites within a day of the disaster. Television, newspapers, and even video blogs showed “Grandpa Wen” directing aid workers and comforting parents and victims. The Chinese government used the media to channel the emotions of the aftermath of the earthquake into grief rather than into the anger that had been shown earlier because of what many parents saw as the shoddy school construction that contributed to the deaths of their children. Later buses carried advertisements about the earthquake to further support the victims (see Figure 1.1).

However, angry parents could not be ignored by the Chinese media. A dramatic photograph of a senior official on his knees begging parents
to trust the government to investigate the school collapses was published in *Southern Metropolis Daily*. The confrontation was quickly picked up by many blogs in China, which spread the photograph and the parents’ anger throughout the nation. *Southern Weekend* in Guangzhou, a newspaper that frequently investigates claims of corruption or serious government errors, ran an interview with a Sichuan education official who said that the earthquake alone could not be the cause of all the school collapses. *Caijing*, a business journal noted for its own tough investigations of private and official corruption, also called for a government probe into shoddy school construction. Even Xinhua, the official government news agency, said an investigation should move forward. Shortly after that Beijing sent a notice to all media to cut back on such coverage.\(^\text{11}\)

A month after the earthquake local officials were trying to block foreign reporters from visiting quake areas and to prevent parents of victims from talking to journalists.\(^\text{12}\) Officials told citizens not to talk to the media and to portray China in a positive light. The Government also moved to shut down their most vocal critics, including Huang Qi, a human rights campaigner. He was arrested while he was advising parents who lost

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*Figure 1.1* A bus advertisement reminds people to “Remember the Sichuan Earthquake,” Campaigns like this raised huge amounts for the victims. *Source: Wynne Wang*
children in collapsed schools how to pursue legal action against local governments. He also wrote about it on his website. Huang had already spent 5 years in prison for campaigning on behalf of parents who lost children in the 1989 government crackdown on the Tiananmen Square demonstrations. Another activist, Liu Shaokun, was also detained and sentenced to a year of re-education in a labor camp for “seriously disturbing social order.” Liu had posted Internet pictures of collapsed schools and had visited parents who had lost children in the earthquake and told them they should protest at government offices.\textsuperscript{13}

A year later on the anniversary of the earthquake officials including President Hu Jintao held a memorial service in Sichuan. Chinese media covered the service and the anniversary but emphasis was clearly on government efforts to get people prepared for China’s next earthquake. “Are we better prepared for another disaster?” asked one guest columnist in \textit{China Daily}.\textsuperscript{14} Another Xinhua article reported government efforts to check the safety of school buildings across the country, only in the last paragraph of the article was there a mention of parents’ complaints about school construction in the earthquake area. No one has ever been charged as a result of those complaints.\textsuperscript{15} Clearly the government does not want to emphasize the toll and parents of the 5,335 students whom the government officially acknowledges died were told not to hold their own memorials under threat of jail sentences. One government official did say that there was need of some investigation, but otherwise officials met questioners with a “wall of silence.”\textsuperscript{16}

But one prominent Chinese citizen is speaking out about how the government has handled the Sichuan tragedy. Ai Weiwei, an artist who helped design the Olympic National Stadium known as “The Bird’s Nest,” posted numerous criticisms on his popular blog. Ai is the son of one of modern China’s most famous poets and from a very famous intellectual family which is why many believe his blog has not been censored. Ai is a provocative figure in China and even though he helped design the Olympic stadium he refused to attend the opening session because, he said, he believed in freedom, not autocracy. Ai and his supporters are working on a documentary about the Sichuan earthquake and have been interviewing parents of children who were killed in the tragedy. He has also been trying to get official records from local officials, who claim they have been as cooperative as the law allows. “He’s totally crazy, he kept asking questions again and again,” said one Sichuan province official who chose to remain unidentified.\textsuperscript{17}
The Beijing Olympics

Many people including Western journalists commented on the “dazzling management” of Beijing’s 2008 Olympic games. Huge crowds, a spectacular 4-hour opening ceremony and impressive Chinese athletes were all part of an Olympiad that will be hard to match. A University of Maryland study of 68 newspapers in 29 countries across the globe found overwhelmingly positive (45 percent) or neutral (40 percent) stories which focused on the games and not politics. Only 15 percent of the stories in the study, which only covered the first week of the games, were negative in tone.

China did try to downplay the cost of the games (estimated at $42 billion) after the Sichuan earthquake devastation only 3 months earlier. Official efforts to control the media coverage of the games and everything else were very clear at times. Indicating the caution and thoroughness of the Chinese approach to the media was the suspension, 2 months before the games opened, of a tourist publication *Time Out Beijing.* When censors spotted a photograph of some wounded victims of the 1989 Tiananmen Square protests, the *Beijing News* was ordered off the newsstands and its website censored. Most public protests were blocked before they got started, but a British TV journalist was seized by police and detained when he witnessed a pro-Tibet demonstration on the Olympic green. He was released when Chinese authorities verified he was an accredited journalist. Foreign journalists protested themselves when they arrived in Beijing and found that many websites were blocked. They had been promised that websites would be open to them. To mollify them President Hu Jintao held the first press conference he had ever given for foreign journalists and promised the websites would be open to them. A few days before the games some, but not all, blocked websites were opened. Amnesty International became accessible but not the Human Rights in China site. The Chinese authorities restored some of the blocks in December, arguing that some websites were violating Chinese law.

Some public protests were officially allowed at the Olympics but Chinese authorities required a permit application 5 days in advance. Some Americans without permits who tried to protest about Tibet were arrested and deported. A few received short jail terms for “disturbing public order.” Chinese who wished to protest about even non-political issues such as land compensation in their home cities found their attempts to get a protest permit effectively blocked.
One embarrassing incident that caused a media reaction in much of the world was the arrest of two elderly women who came to Beijing and tried five times to get a permit to protest about eviction from their home in a distant city. The women were first sentenced to a year in a labor camp for “re-education” but the sentence was later dropped.25

Olympic Committee President Jacques Rogge pointed out that political protests have been banned at Olympic Games for more than 50 years.26 China also had its own violent terrorists to worry about during the Olympics. Their actions had been largely confined to far western China although a bus bombing in Shanghai in May 2008 killing three people was blamed by many on western Uighur separatists. Just before and during the Olympics attacks in western China killed police and security guards. Chinese security officials also claimed to have uncovered a plot to kidnap journalists and others during the Olympics.27

If the media had some controls to worry about during the Olympics, for Central China Television (CCTV) the games were a spectacular success. Watching the opening ceremonies were 840 million Chinese, with an estimated 97 percent of TV sets in China tuned in. In the United States, NBC counted a mere 29 million viewers. CCTV renamed its Sports Channel the “Olympic Channel,” but at one time or another was broadcasting Olympic events on 18 TV channels. Women’s table tennis had 330 million viewers, more than the US population.28

The long-range influence of the Olympic Games on China’s media is unpredictable. Even before the games started Liu Jingmin, Beijing deputy mayor in charge of the Olympics, said the long-range effects of the games would be good for democracy in China. “If people have a target like the Olympics to strive for, it will help us establish a more just and harmonious society (a phrase frequently used by China’s President Hu Jintao), a more democratic society, and help integrate China into the world.”29 Nicholas Kristof, a New York Times correspondent in Beijing, tried unsuccessfully to get through the official barriers to get a protest permit during the Olympics. He said he wanted to protest about the failure of authorities to do enough to preserve Beijing’s old neighborhoods. He was unsuccessful but also believes some democratic changes are coming to China. “My hunch is that in the coming months, perhaps after the Olympics, we will see some approvals granted. China is changing; it is no democracy but it’s no longer a totalitarian state.”30

Since the Olympics the Chinese Government’s attitude toward the media has been decidedly mixed. In March 2009 the official China Daily felt free
to criticize abuses at local jails but the Government also started requiring critics on major Internet portals such as Sina, Sohu, and Netease to post their real names. Another indication of the mixed Chinese view was its 2009 government requirement that all computers install the “Green Dam Youth Escort” filtering software on new computers. After numerous protests the Government “delayed” the requirement.31

An Olympic Toll on Journalists

In 2000, China established November 8 as Journalists’ Day to honor the nation’s 1 million news people. The day had particular irony in 2008 due to the toll that the Olympics and Paralympics took on many in the profession, such as the journalist who had 1 day off from late July to mid September.32 A TV reporter said he knew his career choice would probably mean sacrificing his health and a normal life. For one thing, journalists everywhere in China spend more than 4 hours a day at their computers and have to deal with an ever-watchful political system as well as the usual deadline and other stresses. A report based on 23,640 journalists’ physical exams found 97.5 percent of news people to be “sub healthy.”33