Monitoring Changes in China's Media

Interview with David Bandurski

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David Bandurski explains that, despite the ongoing control of the Party, the Chinese media and their relationship to their audience have greatly changed thanks to the growing commercialization of the media, professionalism of journalists and the rise of the Internet and social media.

La Vie des Idées: You are responsible for managing the website of the China Media Project. Can you explain how and why the China Media Project was created?

David Bandurski: The idea for the China Media Project happened in 2003. That was an interesting time for China's media, when we saw strong reporting of a number of stories, including the outbreak of SARS and the Sun Zhigang case. The latter, you may remember, began with an investigative report by Guangdong's *Southern Metropolis Daily* newspaper into the beating death of a recent college graduate in Guangzhou at the hands of local police. The case highlighted the evils of China's system of so-called detention and repatriation of rural migrants in the cities, and reporting of the case by Chinese media ultimately brought about the repeal of the relevant national law on migrant detention later that year. These and other cases in 2003 really highlighted an important but rarely acknowledged backstory at the time – that Chinese media had undergone major change over the period of a decade, despite rigid control of information. Chan Yuen-ying, the founder and director of the journalism school at the University of Hong Kong, and Qian Gang, the former managing editor of *Southern Weekend*, one of China's most influential professional newspapers, began talking in 2003 about the need for a research project to explore the changes in China's media landscape. We now research changes in China's media, as well as policy and the mechanisms of control, on a real-time basis. This is important because change is happening so fast in China. But another crucial part of our project is our fellows program, for which we invite Chinese

journalists, giving them an opportunity to discuss the press environment in China and the challenges they face, building a network of professional support.

La Vie des Idées: Has the retrocession of Hong Kong had a strong impact on the quality of journalism and the working conditions of journalists there? Is the existence of the China Media Project a sign that they have not degraded as much as expected?

David Bandurski: That's a complicated question, of course. And there are many complaints about the inadequacy of Hong Kong's press from a professional standpoint. But it goes without saying that Hong Kong enjoys a degree of freedom, and rule of law, far surpassing that of the mainland. For various reasons, the Hong Kong press may not always do enough when it comes to reporting news stories, particularly stories about China. But there are strong publications here, and strong reporters. And I think the ongoing debate over the health of Hong Kong's press can be read as a sign of strength too. As for our universities, they are first-rate. At the University of Hong Kong, we now have one of the strongest professional journalism programs in Asia, and we are attracting an increasing number of aspiring journalists from the mainland. So that's a reason to be encouraged.

Control, Change and Chaos
La Vie des Idées: Reports of recent crackdowns on Chinese journalists indicate that the government policy towards them is not relaxing. How would you describe the current state of the Chinese media? Has the greater opening of the Chinese press profoundly changed the face of the Chinese media industry? Has it led to more autonomy for journalists and more freedom of information for the Chinese?

David Bandurski: The best answer to this great big question is to point you to our research, our books, our articles and of course our website. Chinese media present an incredibly complex picture, and as I suggested, that is why Chan Yuen-ying and Qian Gang saw such a need for a project like ours. You are right in supposing that the government policy toward media is not relaxing. In a formal sense, it never has in the past two decades. Control of the media and public opinion has remained an uncompromising priority for the CCP leadership. And yet, there have at the same time been dramatic changes. How do we explain that? Simply speaking, the major factors at play have been commercialization of the media, professionalism and the rise of the Internet and now social media. Media started

commercializing – which is to say they started depending upon advertising, sales and subscriptions – in the mid-1990s, so China has only had a media market, you can say, for a little more than 15 years. In this sense, it is quite a new industry in China. This process did a lot of things, but one important thing was to transform the relationship between the media and the audience. Media still had to be careful politically, minding what is called "propaganda discipline." But they had to mind their audiences and readers as well. This was a shift in orientation. Media now had to become more relevant to the public. It wasn't enough to just report on what Party officials were doing, or the latest government notices. So by the late 1990s, we had a whole new generation of metro newspapers in China that relied entirely on advertising and other revenue sources. They received no state support. Most of these were what we call "spin-offs" of Party newspapers. In Chinese they are actually called "child papers," and their official Party counterparts are "mother papers." The mothers still receive state support, and their content is mostly dry propaganda. By contrast, the commercialized metro papers are rich in content.

It was within this interesting new commercial space that we saw professional journalism making advances in the 1990s and afterwards. By this I mean journalists who see themselves working as part of a professional community whose duty lies with the public, not with the government and its narrow objectives. So we saw these professionals pushing into new areas, especially within the commercial media. Doing in-depth stories and investigative reporting, for example. A clear gap was opening between the Party media and the commercial media on all sorts of stories and issues. One of the most important roles the Internet had was to break down regional boundaries. A story by local media in one province could quickly become a national story by being re-posted on one of China's major news portals, like [QQ.com](QQ.com) or Sina.com. That's just the beginning of the impact the Internet has had, of course. So what we see in China's media today is what Qian Gang has characterized as the "Three C's" – control, change and chaos. Control is still enforced, and we've seen this very clearly in recent months. But changes to China's media, as well as a rapidly changing society, with ever greater demand for information, have created an atmosphere we call "chaos." This chaos actually represents an opportunity, as enterprising professional journalists can exploit the gaps in this complex environment and push coverage further than the authorities might formally allow. When I gave a lecture at Sciences-Po late last year, one audience member asked whether "confusion" might be a better word for the third C than "chaos." I actually like that

suggestion, so perhaps we could say China's media environment is marked by control, change and confusion.

La Vie des Idées: How can the political impact of the autonomy of the press be measured? Can it open (and maintain) a democratic public space?

David Bandurski: Right now, the progress made by China's media is very fragile. In one sense, it is impossible to turn back the clock. But to the extent that there is a public space in China today, it is a space of confusion. There are no formal protections for journalists, and while freedom of expression is guaranteed in China's constitution, this has no real force against the interests of Party leaders. The Party continues to define the role of the press through this notion of "guidance of public opinion", controlling the media and the message to ensure social and political control, so there is no recognition of journalism as an independent profession – even if this notion, as I said, is advancing in the midst of the confusion of China's press environment. Having said that, however, there is no question that the whole process of agenda-setting has changed in China over the last decade. The government is more responsive to the media – reactive may be a better word in many cases. Look at the way, for example, the government has been pushed again and again on the issue of food safety in China. The government agencies responsible for ensuring the food products are safe have been extremely passive. They seem not to have dealt with the root causes of safety problems at all. But the media push case after case into the public eye, creating pressure for action, if not unfortunately change. The Internet is playing a major role too, of course. Recently, someone posted images of receipts online showing that Sinopec, one of China's largest state-run oil companies, had paid over a million yuan to buy expensive alcohol, and alleged that this was used privately by company executives. Newspapers followed up on the story, confirmed the authenticity of at least one receipt, and brought the forced resignation of the general manager of Sinopec's Guangdong branch within a matter of days.

New Technologies are Only Tools
La Vie des Idées: How would you describe the impact of the development of new technologies (microblogs, and so on), Chinese innovations and their massive use in China? Have they complicated the work of censors?

David Bandurski: This is another very complicated question. The first thing to remember is the obvious, that new technologies are just tools. I often hear people remarking as a kind of truism that the Internet must bring change to China. But what kind of change? Let's not forget that China's government has actively built its broadband networks and encouraged Internet use. At the same time, they have applied technologies to control the Internet. New technologies are just tools, and the most important question is who is using them, and how? I've already mentioned the dynamics of control and change, and these help us to answer this question as well. Control is still a major priority for the leadership, but control has had to adapt to change as well. There is a constant tug-of-war in China between the two. So, yes, on one level new technologies have complicated the work of media control. But they are not magic bullets. Last year has been dubbed by many the year of the microblog in China, and Twitter-like microblogs, or "weibo", are having a major impact on how information is created and shared in China. But we can already see the authorities exercising control in response.

La Vie des Idées: Has the Hong Kong media a role to play as far as freedom of information in China is concerned?

David Bandurski: Hong Kong continues to serve as an example for many Chinese of the possibilities of democracy, freedom of speech and rule of law. You can glimpse this, for example, in the writings of Chinese blogger Yang Hengjun, who uses personal anecdotes to share with Chinese readers his own experiences crossing over from the mainland to Hong Kong, where he was posted as a foreign ministry official in the 1990s. Hong Kong is principally an example, however, and the activity of the Hong Kong press has little impact, I think, on the advancement of freedom of information inside China. They are separate issues.

For Further Reading:

- The website of the China Media Project: http://cmp.hku.hk/
- A webpage in English on Chinese blogger Yang Hengjun:
 http://cmp.hku.hk/2011/03/30/11228/
- Chung Tongpil, "Comparing Online Activities in China and South Korea", *Asian Survey*, Vol. 48, Issue 5 (Sep.-Oct. 2008), pp. 727-751
- Xiang Zhou, « The Political Blogosphere in China », *New Media Society*, Vol. 11, Issue 6, 2009, pp. 1003-1022