

Reflections on Media Freedom in China

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Merlene Emerson, Chair Chinese Liberal Democrats, reflects on media censorship in China and questions the role of international broadcasters.

I am writing this on the 22nd anniversary of 'Six Four' (the codename for the Tian An Men incident that occurred on 4th of June 1989). Perhaps no better day to reflect on the subject of media censorship in China and to question the role of international broadcasters?

Only yesterday I was with some 200 people at a talk organised by BBC Chinese Service at Chatham House. <http://www.bbc.co.uk/zhongwen/simp/> To my amazement even the English panel speakers such as Dr Kerry Brown (Head of the Asia Programme at Chatham House), Madeline Earp (Research Associate at the Committee to Protect Journalists) and Prof Hugo de Burgh (Director, China Media Centre) all managed to deliver their speeches in Mandarin. Sadly no interpretations were provided at this over-subscribed event. I attempt here to disseminate some of the content (Chatham House rules have officially been suspended).

Dr Brown is clearly well informed and well connected in China as he is presently working on a political biography of Hu Jintao as well as a book on Taiwan. He stressed that the current leaders have lived through the traumas of the cultural revolution of the 1960s and therefore prize stability in China above all else.

Prof de Burgh was equally diplomatic and attempted to explain the difference between western and Chinese media. Whilst the former adopts an adversarial approach, often challenging and providing a check on the government, in China, it is more a tool of the state. He also showed us a chart with broadsheets and tabloids listed: at the top end FT had reported 8651 items of news on China in 2008, and at the lowest end the Star with only 1369. The role of the media should be to provide balanced reporting and this would cover both the positive and negative stories.

Ms Earp highlighted that China has topped the CPJ list of countries that jailed the most journalists over the last decade. Media freedom had worsened since the award of the Nobel peace prize to Liu XiaoBo and more recently since the sprouting of the Jasmine revolutions in the various countries of the Middle East. A member of audience said that they had only exposed some cases and not covered many others, at which point she invited him to send her any leads.

Of the native Chinese speakers, we had the eminent Jing Zhang, MD of E Asia and Pacific Div of Voice of America who urged western media to ensure high standards of delivery, authoritative sources and quality analysis. Prof LiGong Yu of Shih Hsin University of Taiwan advised that Western media can exert influence over China if it is fair and balanced. Attacks on China motivated by protectionism would not only serve to be counter-productive but may even strengthen China's internal cohesion.

Mdm XiaoLing Zhang from Nottingham University queried whether media reform could lead towards a more democratic future for China. However presently the Chinese Communist Party expects domestic media to promote CCP ideology, and tolerates dissent in areas of administrative and policy implementation within the so called sphere of legitimate controversy but not in areas where it could foment ethnic and violent eruptions.

The raison d'être for the debate was provided by Raymond Li, Head of BBC Chinese. In many ways the organisation was at its cross roads, having been forced by funding cuts to axe its radio service in China and is continuing to search for its audience and market influence in a very difficult economic climate. A member of the audience asked him to consider who BBC Chinese was, and who was its boss. It does make one think that if BBC Chinese is ultimately answerable to the British taxpayer, then where should the organisation be heading in its outreach to a Chinese audience in China and worldwide?

In the end, I feel that we are all engaged in a sort of dance. To first learn the steps and then to invent some new steps, as we embrace change. With our own dilemmas in UK with 'super injunctions' and America's battle with Wikileaks, there are grey areas of what is considered acceptable censorship. The words interaction and negotiation came up time and again as the speakers attempt to balance China's need for stability and control with the inevitable cry from the public for greater freedoms and transparency.

A stalwart was handing out leaflets outside Chatham House publicising the vigil to be held today in Chinatown (Newport Place between 2.30-5pm) and outside the Chinese Embassy (7.30-10pm). However apart from one question from a member of the audience, Tian An Men did not feature in discussions at all.

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