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The evolution of Chinese government communication: Towards transparent governance

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Introduction

In 2001, China achieved what Jiang Zemin, president of the People's Republic of China from 1993 to 2003, referred to as key milestones in the country's pursuit of prosperity: winning the bid to host the 2008 Olympics and becoming a World Trade Organization member. These steps became crucial to China's integration in both the international community and the world economy, but also raised new social and political challenges. China's flourishing economy transformed all levels of Chinese society, including how it communicates, by impelling the government to accept changes it was reluctant to face.

China's government communication system is evolving along with an economic development that, by 2011, made China the second largest economy in the world. Just 30 years ago, China, considered a secretive, mysterious country, was the poster child of the Western idea of authoritarian communism. Soviet-style governance, where the government had absolute control over all aspects of life, and especially the flow of information, dominated the Middle

Kingdom and isolated it from the rest of the world. In the first three decades of Communist Party rule, before Deng Xiaoping, president between 1978 and 1992 and the reformer of China's economy, took power, China's economy was hobbled by the chaos of the Great Leap Forward and the Cultural Revolution, a decade of political upheaval led by Mao Zedong's Red Guards (Pan, 2008).¹

China compromised control for a more profitable and open economy. In doing so, it is slowly and cautiously adapting to internationally accepted standards, not only in business, but also in media practices. As a result, the government faces new challenges from a public space exposed to a new media and social environment, where control of information is no longer feasible.

With one-third of China's 1.3 billion people having access to the internet and more than 1 billion using cell phones (China Internet Network Information Center, 2010), China faces new technologies that, for the first time, created a bridge between the government, the people and the outside world (Tai, 2006). Technology has become a vital source of information and a place for unprecedented public expression for those that can access it. These new forms of media remain closely monitored and censored by the Chinese government, based on the fear that an uncontrolled internet could become a danger for the long-term stability of the state (Dickie, 2007).

The rise of not only active information consumers, but also information creators, brought changes in China's party politics and influenced its communication strategies. These changes come from experimentation, as means to reach China's ultimate goal of maintaining the power of the existing system through economic development. In order to maintain such power in an environment in which no information can be hidden, the Chinese government is cautiously taking steps towards a model of openness and transparent governance, while maintaining a strong grip on media content.

While the development model of the West based on free capitalism, which leads to democracy, has been shaken by the financial crisis, the Chinese communist leadership provides an alternative version of how the world could work. China's new experimental economic model seems to show economic success is possible while monitoring and censoring media content.

Interplay of politics, government and media

An observation of China's governance style and its impact on the media landscape is vital to understanding China's government communication and media. This chapter provides an overview of the interplay between politics, government and media, by looking at the Chinese political system, its media landscape and government communication system.

China's political system and the media

As a state where one single party has unchallengeable power, few, if any, issues affect China's present and future more than the nature of the ruling party and its government (Shambaugh, 2008). The Chinese Communist Party (CCP or Party), and the government are vertically integrated and extensively interlocked.

The core of the CCP is the Central Committee and at its centre, the Politburo Standing Committee, is China's most powerful policy and decision-making entity, comprised of the Party's nine most senior officials. The nine elected members have the power to recommend the leaders of the most influential bodies of the government – the National People's Congress (NPC), the State Council and the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference (CPPCC). The members of the Politburo Standing Committee, responsible for the country's macroeconomic development and political stability, generally simultaneously hold positions within the government.

At the time of writing, the structures of the Party and the government, which are expected to change by 2012, are as follows: at the top of the Party, and standing first in rank in the Politburo Standing Committee, is the General Secretary Hu Jintao, who also stands at the top of the government structure as the president or head of state (see Figure 15.1). His role as the president is to establish general policy and direction for the state. Meanwhile, the head of the administrative government and third in rank in the Politburo Standing Committee, Premier of the State Council, Wen Jiabao, executes implementation of policy and direction.

In terms of communication, in 2011 the Chinese Communication Chief, Li Changchun, ranks number five in the Politburo Standing Committee, but has *de facto* power surpassing his ranking (see Figure 15.1). Li can appoint the ministers responsible for the most important communication organs in the country (Martin, 2010). Therefore, the Politburo Standing Committee of the CPP is the highest body in charge of China's media and communication strategies.

Below the Politburo Standing Committee, the Party operates in a pyramidal power structure organized at state, provincial, municipality, county, town and village levels. The Party has 66.4 million members; on its bottom layer, there is a network of 3.51 million 'primary Party organizations' based in villages (Yin, 2010). The government also answers to the hierarchical pattern of a pyramid, in the order of president, premier, vice-premier, state council and its ministries, provincial, municipal and county governance.

Within the pyramidal structure, China's government is effectively divided into two parts – one central system and one local (Yin, 2010). The central administration of the government is composed of 49 state-level leaders, who

FIGURE 15.1 *China's government structure and media entities*

form the CCP Politburo, the NPC, the State Council and the CPPCC. The highest administrative body, the State Council, is a cabinet of about 50 people in charge of ministries and other key organizations led by the premier (Martin, 2010) (see Figure 15.1). Under the umbrella of the State Council, there are ministries and institutions,² which interpret and implement Chinese policy goals and are hierarchical at provincial and local levels (Yin, 2010). The NPC, the highest state body and the sole legislative house in China, has power over the State Council, because it can reject or accept proposed bills from the State Council and also elects the president, premier and cabinet-level officials selected by the Party (Martin, 2010). The NPC and the CPPCC, the most influential political advisory bodies, are the two organizations in China that make national level political decisions (Saich, 2004).

The Party and government structures remain closely paralleled (Mirsky, Guerrero & Wood, 2008). Party committees and representatives are present in government agencies as well as most organizations, including universities and foreign-owned enterprises (Saich, 2004). Although being a member of

the Party is not a requirement by law, most senior government officials are (Saich, 2004). However, non-Party members taking high-ranking positions in the government have been rising, including the Health Minister, the Science and Technology Minister and almost 50 per cent of the NPC's Vice Chairmen. There are eight other political parties³ recognized in the system, but ultimately no other party approximates the power of the Communist Party in China (Martin, 2010).

China's media landscape

Adjusting to a more patent interconnection with the world, experimentation in government communication, as in all spheres of Chinese society, is prominent. It is considered the biggest and most successful experimentation of authoritarianism in the world (Pan, 2008). China often takes three steps forward and two steps back, in line with Deng's economic policy of experimentation with caution by crossing the river by feeling the stones (Kitissou, 2007).

In this experimentation process, China is moving towards transparency, forced by a revision of media governance and the emergence of new media. These first steps were triggered by the outbreak of Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome, or SARS, in 2003, which led to the creation of a new system of government spokespeople (see Table 15.1). The dissemination of accurate information to the public became a priority, and SARS, a milestone of change in the government's approach to media management.

Birth of China's government communication system and a 'new' journalism

The spread of this international epidemic changed how the Chinese government approached communication with its 1.3 billion citizens (see Table 15.1). During the SARS outbreak, China's communication strategy of 'thought work',⁴ based on information control and silence, was strained to deal with an increasingly open and global domestic audience with access to the internet. Instructions to suppress information at national and local levels and a lack of information from the government instigated a new network in the public sphere to provide information outside of the government-media framework. Mobile technology, informal channels of communication (e.g. email, chat rooms, social networks), in combination with sources outside of mainland China had made information control impossible (Dillon, 2009).

TABLE 15.1 Overview of recent history of media in China

1949–78:	Media as ‘thought work’
1978:	Economic reform and opening up
1978–2003:	Commercialization, globalization and professionalization of the media
2003:	SARS outbreak
2003–6:	Post-SARS media revisions: government communication system with spokespeople and birth of ‘new’ journalism
2007:	Preparation for the 2008 Olympic Games: revisions towards transparent governance
2008–present (2012):	Adaptation in an internet age

SARS was a crude awakening for the Chinese government. Traditional ways of propaganda and information control were no longer feasible, and disclosure became necessary to tame public unrest. China’s first forced experiment of communication became a debacle, and China’s image worsened domestically and internationally (Tai & Sun, 2007).

Attempting to overcome the SARS’s communication fiasco, effort was put into establishing a spokespeople system across all levels of the government and into communicating with the media (Wang, 2011). Before 2003, the Chinese government had a handful of government officials that reluctantly talked to the media. By 2011, every department of all levels of the government had officials in charge of communicating with journalists (Yoon Park, 2011). The SARS outbreak not only triggered the creation of channels of communication, but also shook off the existing media system and brought to life a role for critical journalism new to China (see Table 15.1).

Chinese media in an internet age

As in the rest of the world, the internet is transforming how people share and access information. SARS ‘shed light on the prospect of new communication technologies spearheaded by the internet as an empowerment tool for individuals to bypass official control and create alternative communication resources in Chinese society, where the authoritarian state controls vital channels of information’ (Tai & Sun, 2007, p. 1004).

These new voices created a bridge between the Party, the people and the world. Adapting to it, China uses new media to get public feedback, but also carefully supervises it and explores ways to overcome new political challenges – and even, in some cases, to turn these technologies into content

management tools for social monitoring. In 2007, President Hu Jintao said that an uncontrolled internet was a serious threat, and that 'whether or not (China) can actively use and effectively manage the internet will affect national, cultural information security and long-term stability of the state' (Dickie, 2007, para. 2).

The internet is pivotal in changing the way Chinese government communication functions, but in rural areas, where only less than one-third have internet access, traditional media outlets, such as the *People's Daily* or the 7 o'clock evening news of China Central Television, or CCTV, broadcast by every provincial television station, are still more influential. The relationship of Chinese media organizations with the government is still strongly marked by their nature and role at their time of birth.

China's traditional media were born under tight control of the Party as an instrument of 'thought work', under the People's Republic of China in 1949. China had taken its governing style from the Soviet Union, in which media was controlled by the government and existed merely to fulfil the agenda of the single ruling party (Lynch, 1999). Media was used to control information and for the transmission of economic and political messages of the government and surveillance; only trustees of the party had access to media.

For decades, the idea of being a journalist in China was different from that in the Western countries. Traditionally, a press conference in Chinese used to be literally translated as 'reception for reporters' and reporters were members of Party cadres. Competitive and harsh, journalism was a political career, as journalists were considered elites, especially if they worked at large national media organizations. Chinese journalists were more like 'publicists', who distributed information to mass audiences under the supervision of the Party. The entire system was tightly controlled on every level by the Propaganda Department of the Party, or PD, currently known as Publicity Department⁵ (Lynch, 1999).

From 1978, when China's marketization was set in motion, contradictions difficult to deal with by the intertwining party control and market forces were created (Zhao, 2000); 'Thought work' became globalized, pluralized and commercialized (Lynch, 1999); and new media technology from simple live radio and television, to the internet gradually entered the scene. The existing system was strongly challenged and China's media entered a period of dramatic revision, still ongoing.

Although Chinese domestic media organizations still hold a role as transmitters of the government's message, there is a diversification to the extent to which they represent China's voice. While the output of state-owned media outlets such as Xinhua News Agency or CCTV is considered to have almost official status, there are more independent and private publications, *Caijing* for example, and others that, influenced by China's media market, are more commercial (Yoon Park, 2011).

Governance in government communication

The main governing body that oversees the media and maintains the authority of the Party is the PD (see Figures 15.1 and 15.2). Its primary function is to provide licensing to media outlets, and most importantly, give instructions to the media on what can and cannot be said through guidelines and self-censorship. Its ultimate aim is to protect state interests, including security, and ruling party legitimacy through ideology-related work. The PD has the power to nominate presidents and CEOs of all national level state-owned media organizations and appoint ministers of media and information related ministries, as well as the government officers under the State Council. Although the PD is not formally considered to be part of the government, it is the actual enforcer of media censorship and guidance (Brady, 2008).

Under the supervision of the PD and the State Council, Xinhua News Agency, or Xinhua, is the top official news agency of the government (see Figure 15.2). No other media organization is given better access to the decision-making circles than Xinhua, whose official coverage other media organizations routinely wait for to report important events. At the national level, the 'ministerial level' media organizations – government-protected monopolies – collaborate to maintain and manage a collective voice of the Party and government.

Because of the nature of its government, China's media regulatory system is unlike any other. Regulation of media content is not through law but through daily practices that depend on the basic structure of the media and the Party. China's communication related bodies, such as the State Administration of Radio, Film, and Television (SARFT), State Administration of Press and Publications (SAPP), the State Council Information Office (SCIO) and the Ministry of Culture (see Figures 15.1 and 15.2), act as departments under the directives of the PD. Each body controls a specific aspect of the media. For example, SARFT oversees the editorial content of CCTV, China Radio International and China National Radio (see Figure 15.2); SAPP regulates news, print periodicals and internet publications; and the SCIO is the chief administrative information office of the government under the State Council.

In addition, there are different ethical codes of conduct created by independent associations, such as the All-China Journalist Association at the national level and other provincial level journalist associations. These ethical codes guide journalists in their way of communicating and reporting. Although these codes do not have definite bounding power, most association members are Party members and have the power to prevent those not following the codes from getting influential jobs.

There is no specific media law in China, but there is a structural media content management system through legal courts, specialized government

FIGURE 15.2 *Chinese government communication structure*

agencies and independent associations developed because of the fast expansion of the media industry (Zhao, 1998). New clauses related to business journalism, as well as business and sports coverage, were added to the general law. Also, significant departments of the government were given authority to develop and legitimate media structures by means of administrative ‘regulations’ (Zhao, 2008, p. 27).

This lax policy on media management allowed the media to become a platform and watchdog for lobbying and for stimulating public discussion. The NPC and the CPPCC annual meetings are now heavily covered, turning these gatherings into a lobbying festival, making NPC and CPPCC members some of the most-talked-about political celebrities. This process of creation of regulations and laws to rule the economy also affected companies, that once only were affected by the five-year plan and how they fitted into it. Because of it, business lobbying also became widespread, directed to influencing economic policies and, thus, the life chances of companies (Kennedy, 2005).

These developments occur in an improvised manner, as the media regulations and laws regarding the 2008 Beijing Olympics show. This process

of media legitimization and rule of 'law' is based in experimentation, aligned with the country's 'socialism with Chinese characteristics'.

Transparent governance towards the Beijing Olympics

The 2008 Olympics were not only China's coming out party to the world, they were also what shaped China's current model of more transparent governance. Although the arrival of the Games was thoroughly prepared since Beijing won its bid in 2001, the process tested the central government's ability to manage information, crises and foreign media in a new China, and brought along policy and regulatory changes.

As part of its bid to host the 2008 Olympics, China promised to relax constraints and 'be open in every aspect of the country and the whole world' (Beijing Organizing Committee for the 2008 Olympic Games, 2002, para. 3). In efforts to uphold this promise, the 'Regulations on Reporting Activities in China by Foreign Journalists during the Beijing Olympic Games and the Preparatory Period' were passed by the State Council. These measures, effective since January 2007 and set to expire two months after the Olympics on October 2008, gave more freedom to foreign correspondents and simplified processes to get interviews only requiring the interviewee's consent (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2006). On 17 October 2008, they became permanent (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2008). In parallel, in November 2007, the NPC adopted the 'Emergency Response Law of the PRC', that dropped the requirement for Chinese reporters to get permission before reporting a crisis (NPC, 2009).

The adoption of these changes motivated the Chinese government to consider seriously its freedom of information regulations. In 2007, the State Council promulgated the Open Government Information Regulation, China's first national directive designed to make government information more accessible to the public (Horsley, 2007). This regulation, adopted in April 2007 and effective since 1 May 2008, took a dual approach to greater transparency by requiring government agencies to disseminate certain information on their own initiative and to make disclosures in response to requested information within 15 to 30 days (Shaw, 2011). These regulations marked a break away from a long tradition, and a still ingrained culture of government secrecy (Xinhua, 2007).

Spokespeople system in the Chinese government

After the Olympics, every department in the government was required to establish the position of spokesperson and start training programs in media

relations for its officials (Dong & Muhariwa, 2011). A network of spokespeople was created in charge of administering the government's communication goals; supervising the communication regarding policy implementation; and acting as the voice of the government.

This spokespeople system may vary but it has a standard hierarchical structure with officials at all levels of the government. The vice-minister of each ministry has the role of chief communication officer or main spokesperson on special occasions. The usual contact with the media on a day-to-day basis is the chief of the communication department, who is the routine spokesperson for the ministry. For ministries, which are more relevant to international media, such as the Foreign Ministry and the Ministry of Commerce, a new post, positioned between the vice-minister and the chief of the communication department, exists as ministry spokesperson, whose role is specifically to communicate with the press.

The training program, supervised by the Party, is centrally provided by the government's chief administrative information office, the SCIO. The training programs are organized according to the hierarchical structure of the levels of government. For example, a ministry level spokesperson of the Health Ministry will participate in the training program organized by the SCIO at the ministerial level; however a local level spokesperson will participate in the training program organized by the local government.

Newly recruited communication specialists are required to attend an intensive five-day seminar centrally organized by the SCIO. A selection of trainers, including officials, university professors, communication trainers, or former journalists and editors, is appointed by the SCIO for these seminars. The workshops include a variety of different topics, usually related to communication strategy and the individual expertise of the ministry the spokesperson serves (interview with communications advisor to several ministries, 2011).

Programmes at academic institutions, such as the spokespeople training programme at Tsinghua University, play an important role in the development of China's efforts towards transparent governance. Since 2003, the Tsinghua spokespeople programmes assisted in the training of a total of 30,000 ministry and office level spokespeople.

Unlike the organization of the training programmes, official spokespeople are not centrally appointed; they are recruited through individual ministries and government offices. The recruitment process is left for each ministry to design and execute. Most spokespeople come from communications or journalistic backgrounds, information departments of the ministries, or are organically grown within each ministry or government office. Key state-level communicators, however, are usually positions reserved for highly ranked

officials within the close circle of the government. Given the nature of the government, most spokespeople are Party members.

This spokespeople system is mainly funded by the government. Individual ministries finance government communication activities from their administrative budget as communication is part of their daily operations. Since government-protected media organizations have to provide services to government communication projects, the government has access to free communication platforms. Some international companies, like Thomson Reuters, provide training overseas for government officials, but not on a regular basis. There are other government communication projects also run by NGOs or individual citizens (interview with communication advisor, 2011).

In recent years, the Chinese government also adopted advertising as a type of endorsement in promoting China's image abroad. Commercials shown on CNN and New York Times in 2010 (Shanghai 2010 World Expo Organizing Committee, 2007) and an advertisement shown in Time Square in early 2011 (Chao, 2011) are examples of such efforts subsidized by government agencies.

The communication departments can be called information or research offices because they also research data, policy implementation and stakeholders' expectations. As governance became more complex, there was an increasing need of professional expertise. Many government entities started hiring independent marketing companies to get public feedback or running their own for-profit research centres. This led to a proliferation of think tanks and other research institutions sponsored and linked to the government.

For instance, academic institutions, such as Peking University, and non-governmental agencies, like the Horizon Research Consultancy, established their own research centres. These institutes, along with government think tanks, like the Chinese Academy of Social Science, chaired by the vice chairman of the NPC, or the State Council's Development Research Center, are gaining importance in the policy-making process.

In contrast to other government bodies, the think-tank world in China is accessible and active. Scholars from these institutions emphasize research, attend international conferences, publish papers and journal articles, and can be reached by the government, businesses and other organizations alike. This emphasis on research has made the government susceptible to public feedback, and led to a significant rise in open polls through different channels of media, online and in print.

For instance, the Health Ministry conducted a health policy survey on sina.com and sohu.com to understand public sentiment. Based on the response that the public had little understanding of the new policies, it revised its

communication strategy and also produced a 30-episode television series called 'The Doctors', modelled after the popular American television series 'Grey's Anatomy' to improve the ministry's image. Based on public feedback, new ideas are adopted and policies revised.

Conclusion

Confucius said 'silence is a true friend who never betrays', but to China in the twenty-first century silence is no longer a friend. Forced by an environment in flux, the government is impelled to accept changes that are crucial to maintain its legitimacy but which it has been reluctant to face.

Therefore, China's government communication is making steps towards transparency by relaxing information control, and increasing willingness to work with the media. In 2001, China won the bid to host the Olympics and became more exposed to the world. After the SARS outbreak, China established a crisis management system to respond to communicating emergencies, and new regulations were set in motion with the Olympic Games in 2008.

The new media expansion led by the internet and mobile technology created a new public space where ordinary citizens were empowered to create their own information. With the largest number of internet users in the world, the Party realizes news can no longer be controlled and that the fastest person to cover any emergency can be anyone among the nearly 1 billion mobile phone users. New media made information control more difficult by transforming the relationship between the Chinese authorities, its people and the international community, and pressured the government to open up. And adjusting to this, the government adopted new technologies as a source of public feedback, which is increasingly influential in the policy decision-making process.

China's integration with the rest of the world has prompted a new discipline of government communication. The PD once had absolute control of all media content and had stringent control on 'thought work' in China, but this has given way to a less restrained communication structure headed by government spokespeople. The structuring of the spokespeople system is part of the government's effort to modernize government communication and add accountability and transparency to its communication strategy.

As of now, Chinese government experimentation in communication is trying to bring more transparency and openness, along with more participation of the people in decision making about the country. However, it is important to note that all communication efforts and branches of the Communist Party have the ultimate goal of maintaining the status quo of the Party state and that China walks three steps forward and two backwards. Questions remain

on where the next step of governmental experimentation will head and whether the government can find a way to continue adding accountability and transparency to communication strategy while keeping the Party's overall control of the message.

As the global financial crisis assailed the Western governing system, the world is watching for alternative models of media, economics and politics. Therefore, China's quest for its own government communication strategy has implications far beyond the world's most populous nation. It may offer an alternative model that combines a capitalist approach to market reforms with a new style of transparent governance in a new 'political system with Chinese characteristics' (Wang & Cheng, 2010). It is still too early to see what the future holds but the ability to maintain political control and interventionism, while delivering successful economic growth in a China with freer flow of information and a stronger voice, will be worth watching as an alternative form of governance.

Nomenclature

CCP	Chinese Communist Party
CCTV	China Central Television
CPPCC	Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference
NPC	National People's Congress
PD	Propaganda Department of the Chinese Communist Party
SAPP	State Administration of Press and Publications
SARFT	State Administration of Radio, Film, and Television
SARS	Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome
SCIO	State Council Information Office
Xinhua	Xinhua News Agency

Notes

- 1 The Great Leap Forward was a failed attempt to transform the agrarian nation into an industrial powerhouse affecting Chinese policy planning from 1958 to 1961. The Cultural Revolution, or the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution, was a socio-political movement to enforce socialism by removing capitalist, traditional and cultural elements from the Chinese society, and impose Maoist orthodoxy within the Party that took place between 1966 and 1976. The Red Guards were a civilian mass movement of young students during the Cultural Revolution.
- 2 This includes media-related organizations like Xinhua News Agency and the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences.

- 3 The eight registered minor parties under CPC direction are Revolutionary Committee of the Kuomintang. China Democratic League. China Democratic National Construction Association. China Association for Promoting Democracy. Chinese Peasants' and Workers' Democratic Party. Zhigongdang of China. Jiusan Society and Taiwan Democratic Self-Government League.
- 4 'Thought work' is the control of communication flows and the structuralization of the worldviews, values and action strategies of a government's subjects.
- 5 The PD is still known in Chinese as the Propaganda Department, but the name in English was changed to Publicity Department after the government learned the word 'propaganda' had negative connotations.

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