

**CHINA'S MEASURED MEDIA
LIBERALIZATION: GEARING UP
FOR THE BEIJING OLYMPICS**

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Executive Summary

1. China wants to showcase its modern and progressive image at the Olympic Games in August 2008. The unprecedented access granted to the foreign and local media to report on the Sichuan earthquake in May 2008 seemed a refreshing departure from China's penchant for controlling information flow in a disaster.
2. Over the years, China has made a concerted effort to improve the environment for foreign journalists in the country. This was a commitment China made when it bid for the Olympic Games in 2001. Some of the key measures introduced since then include the easing of reporting restrictions, providing better services to foreign journalists and instituting the news briefing and spokesman system.
3. These measures reflect China's effort to streamline and professionalize its media management system. They also indicate China's growing confidence in handling the foreign media. In particular, the news briefing and spokesman system allows China to present its interpretation of events which is intended to help the foreign media to be more balanced when reporting on the country.
4. To further spruce up its image, China has selectively released Chinese individuals jailed previously for various crimes against the state. The international media has closely followed China's treatment of these high-profile cases and their release is meant to assuage foreign concern about China's appalling human rights record.
5. To some extent, liberalization has also been extended to the local media which has been accorded greater leeway to report on news in line with the people-first policy of the Party and government. Under this orientation, the local media is given more room to check official excesses and reflect the people's concerns and aspirations.

6. In particular, the provision on the disclosure of government information that came into effect in May 2008 is an attempt at improving official accountability and transparency. The provision, *inter alia*, requires relevant government ministries at various levels to release information that affects the immediate interests of the public. The public and the media have a role to play to supervise the actions of the various government bodies in this regard.
7. The spate of media liberalization measures introduced so far is partly driven by China's desire to put forth its best showing in the run-up to and during the Olympics. They are also driven by the gradual yet profound socio-economic changes taking place in China. The three decades of open door and reform policy have led to greater awareness of the people's rights as citizens. Chinese citizens are also better informed with increasing frequent travels and access to technology.
8. Recognizing this irrevocable trend, the now more confident leadership has accorded greater weight to the views of the ordinary people. By involving the people in making decisions that affect them or by appearing to do so, the Party and government seek to enhance their legitimacy. This will in turn ensure the Party's continued dominance in Chinese politics.
9. Media liberalization in China is likely to proceed gradually, sometimes fitfully. Much would depend on the prevailing political circumstances and needs, and the leadership's calculation on whether such changes will benefit China as a whole and the Party in particular.

CHINA'S MEASURED MEDIA LIBERALIZATION: GEARING UP FOR THE BEIJING OLYMPICS

LYE Liang Fook*

Trappings of Greater Media Freedom

- 1.1 Beijing wants to showcase China's modern and progressive image at the Olympic Games in August 2008. The unprecedented access granted to the foreign and local media to report on the Sichuan earthquake in May 2008 seemed a refreshing departure from China's penchant for controlling information flow during a natural disaster. China has won much praise especially on the external front for this apparent change in its approach to the media.
- 1.2 Indeed, as part of its preparation for the Games, China has made a concerted effort over the years to improve the environment for foreign journalists in the country. Back in 2001, while bidding to host the 2008 Olympic Games, Wang Wei, Secretary General of the Beijing Olympic Bid Committee, gave the assurance that "the world media will enjoy full freedom to report on all aspects of China, if the Olympic Games are held in Beijing".¹
- 1.3 Several media liberalization measures have since been introduced to meet this commitment. The measures include the easing of reporting restrictions and providing better services for foreign journalists; expanding the news briefing and spokesman system to more government ministries, more provincial cities and even party organizations; introducing a provision to promote government

* Lye Liang Fook is Senior Research Officer at the East Asian Institute. The author would like to thank Prof. John Wong for going through the many drafts of this background brief and for his valuable advice and comments. The author would also like to thank Dr. Chen Gang for sharing his perspective on this topic.

¹ "China – 2004 World Press Freedom Review" by *International Press Institute* at http://www.freemedia.at/cms/ipi/freedom_detail.html?country=/KW0001/KW0005/KW0114/&year=2004.

transparency; and, selectively releasing jailed Chinese individuals from time to time.²

- 1.4 Some of the measures were unthinkable several years ago. They are made possible now due to China's greater interdependence with the rest of the world, leading it to adhere more closely to international norms. Cai Wu, former Head of the State Council Information Office (SCIO), renewed the assurance in December 2007 that China will adopt a "more open attitude toward the world and ensure better services for the media". He added that China's increasing integration with the world has created the need to strengthen its "relationship and cooperation with the global community".³
- 1.5 More importantly, in hosting the Beijing Olympics, China wants to project itself as a friendly, progressive and forward-looking nation. Through meticulous planning, coordination and execution, China is showing that it has the wherewithal and skill, as any developed country, to successfully host a major event. China wants to be regarded as a country that is developing rapidly in a peaceful manner and playing a positive role on the regional and world stage.
- 1.6 However, critics of China's media liberalization measures doubt whether these mark genuine reforms towards greater press freedom. In their view, these measures particularly the easing of reporting restrictions are short term gestures that will be withdrawn after the Beijing Olympics despite Cai Wu's assurance that they will remain if they can facilitate exchanges between China and the foreign media.⁴ In particular, *Human Rights Watch* has asserted that

² Zhao Yan, a former *New York Times* employee, was released in September 2007 after serving three years in prison. He was charged with revealing state secret and for fraud. President Bill Clinton and Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice had lobbied Hu Jintao for his release. Also, Ching Cheong, a Hong Kong-based reporter for Singapore's *Straits Times* accused of spying for Taiwan, was released before his five-year jail term ended. He was released on 5 February 2008, in time to celebrate the Lunar New Year. The release of these individuals has been regarded as a public relations exercise to cast China in a positive light. See "China releases jailed New York Times employee", *International Herald Tribune*, 14 September 2007 and "China frees Hong Kong journalist ahead of Olympics", *Reuters*, 5 February 2008.

³ "Better services for overseas media promised", *China Daily*, 28 December 2007.

⁴ "Foreign journalists 'welcome in China' ", *China Daily*, 29 December 2006.

the “gap between government rhetoric and reality for foreign journalists remains considerable”.⁵ Other critics have observed that the greater freedom for foreign journalists does not necessarily extend to Chinese journalists or Chinese staff assisting foreign correspondents. Some others cite the occasional arrests of Chinese individuals as evidence that things have barely changed.⁶

- 1.7 Besides the foreign media, the local media is accorded more room to check official excesses and reflect the people’s concerns and aspirations.⁷ Where certain socio-economic problems are highlighted by the local media, the authorities are quick to address them. Nevertheless, the greater reporting scope granted to the local media is occurring within limits set by the Party’s Publicity Department (formerly the Propaganda Department).
- 1.8 Whether the spate of media liberalization measures will continue or even herald more positive changes will depend on whether the Party regards these initiatives as useful in strengthening its leading role in Chinese politics. If they can improve governance by raising the level of accountability and transparency without being too cumbersome, then they are likely to continue. Also, it would be politically costly for the leadership to withdraw these measures after the Olympics. The approach taken will be incremental and may even evolve fitfully.

Image Building through the Foreign Media

- 2.1 In line with its Olympic commitment, China has taken several measures to create a more conducive environment for foreign journalists over the years. Some of the key measures are highlighted in **Table 1**.

⁵ “China’s forbidden zones: shutting the media out of Tibet and other ‘sensitive’ stories”, *Human Rights Watch*, July 2008 (<http://hrw.org.reports/2008/china0708/index.htm>).

⁶ In December 2007, Hu Jia, an AIDS and environmental activist, was arrested on subversion charges. In the same month, Wang Dejie, a cyber dissident, was also arrested on subversion charges for criticizing the government over human rights abuses ahead of the Beijing Olympics. Wang Dejie was released in January 2008 on the condition that he refrains from posting writings critical of the government. He was also instructed not to grant interviews to foreign reporters.

⁷ Local media is a generic term used here to distinguish it from the foreign media. It refers to Chinese-owned media entities including newspapers, books, magazines, journals and TV stations at either the central or local levels.

**TABLE 1 MAJOR INITIATIVES TO SUPPORT MEDIA COVERAGE
OF BEIJING OLYMPICS**

Dates	Initiatives	Details
5 Dec 07	Service Guide for Paralympic Games	The guide has details on the press by number accreditation, media freight and shipping, press rate card and other media information.
10-12 Oct 07	2 nd World Press Briefing	Final briefing on preparations
23-29 Sep 07	3 rd World Broadcaster Meeting	Final briefing on broadcasting matters
1 Jul 07	One-Stop Service	A 24-hour service to coordinate with various government departments to deliver services to the foreign media
Jul 07	Good Luck Beijing Sports Events	Test events to evaluate the various services provided
9 May 07	Service Guide for Foreign Media Coverage	The guide has details on visa application, customs clearance, travel and interview, employment of Chinese mainland citizens and rental of housing and offices
Mar 07	Media Guide Kits	The kit guides the media on matters related to accreditation, accommodation, media freight and shipping, and renting of office space
1 Jan 07	Regulations on Reporting Activities in China by Foreign Journalists	Foreign journalists can travel freely within China once the interviewee or organization has agreed to meet them
25-28 Sep 06	1 st World Press Briefing	First briefing on preparations
9-11 Aug 06	2 nd World Broadcaster Meeting	Second briefing on broadcasting matters
21-23 Sep 05	1 st World Broadcaster Meeting	Inaugural briefing on the Beijing Olympic Broadcasting Co. (a Sino-foreign joint venture) broadcasting production plan, the International Broadcast Center planning and venue services for broadcasters
Apr 04	Media Operations Department	This department handles the diverse requirements of media coverage

Source: Author's own compilation from the Beijing Olympic Games website at <http://en.beijing2008.cn/media/>.

2.2 The first measure is the implementation of the “Regulations on Reporting Activities in China by Foreign Journalists during the Olympic Games and the Preparatory Period” since January 2007.⁸ The regulations ease reporting restrictions on foreign journalists as they only require the consent of the interviewees or organizations to travel within China for interviews. Previously, foreign journalists had to go through a more laborious process of first applying for permission through the local Foreign Affairs Office. The regulations are effective from 1 January 2007 to 17 October 2008.

⁸ These regulations removed some restrictions that had been in place in the 1990 Regulations on the Supervision of Foreign Journalists and Resident Foreign News Organizations.

- 2.3 The second measure is the compilation of a Service Guide for the foreign media in May 2007. It contains useful information such as accreditation, visa application, custom clearance for reporting equipment, driving in China, radio frequencies, insurance and taxation. The third measure is the offer of a one-stop service by the Beijing Olympic Media Centre in July 2007. With this service, foreign journalists have access to enquiry, application, review, approval and reply services under one roof. The fourth measure is the launch of the “Good Luck Beijing Sports Events” from July 2007 to June 2008 which were test events to evaluate, *inter alia*, the effectiveness of media services provided.⁹ Any shortcoming identified is expected to be rectified before the start of the Games.
- 2.4 Besides meeting its Olympic obligations, Beijing has also initiated media liberalization measures in other areas. Most notable is the news briefing and spokesman system (新闻发布制度) introduced in 2004. The system comprises three levels, i.e. the SCIO, various departments of the State Council and provincial governments. At each level, there are designated press spokesmen to engage the media at regular and even impromptu press conferences to convey the government’s responses and positions on various issues. The purpose is to institutionalize the dissemination of timely and accurate news.
- 2.5 **Appendix 1** provides an overview of the improvements made to the news briefing and spokesman system over the years. Since 2004, there has been an increase in annual press conferences held at the levels of the SCIO, various departments of the State Council and provincial governments. In 2007, the total figure was 1,408 compared to 1,321 in 2006, and 1,088 in 2005. In 2006, the SCIO published for the first time the press spokesmen of the 31 provinces, autonomous regions and municipalities in addition to the press spokesmen of the various departments of the State Council. Another significant development in 2006 was that six Party organizations adopted the news briefing and spokesman system.¹⁰

⁹ “Address by Liu Qi at 2007 World Broadcaster Meeting”, Beijing Olympic Games website, 27 September 2007 (<http://en.beijing2008.cn/bocog/bocognews/headlines/n214167287.shtml>).

¹⁰ “Cabinet spokesman Cai Wu meets the press”, *China Daily*, 29 December 2006.

- 2.6 There is also a practice of having high-ranking government officials take responsibility for explaining official policies and positions on various issues. In 2006 there were 59 officials of vice-ministerial rank and above, including 12 ministers, who chaired press conferences to release information of public interest. This was an improvement over 2005, when over 40 vice ministers did the same. The SCIO has stepped up its training of government and Party officials to equip them with the skills to handle the media.¹¹
- 2.7 In 2007, the Party and government took further steps to shed their secretive image. The Party's International Department (中共中央对外联络部) held an "open house" in September 2007 for Beijing residents. In the same month, the Central Commission for Discipline Inspection (中共中央纪律检查委员会) invited the foreign media to visit its executive supervision branch. On its part, the government published three white papers on China's food safety, political party system and energy situation in 2007.¹²
- 2.8 Separately, the People's Liberation Army (PLA) invited the foreign media on a rare visit to Brigade 196, a top army unit, just before the 80th Anniversary of the PLA on 1 August 2007.¹³ In May 2008, the first ever appointed Ministry of Defense press spokesman Hu Changming (胡昌明) gave a briefing together with other senior military officials on the PLA's role in the Sichuan earthquake.
- 2.9 The spate of media liberalization measures by China, either to meet its Olympic obligations or in other areas, serve a number of purposes. First, they are intended to present China's best face to the international community before and during the Olympics. China wants to raise its international profile by displaying a modern and progressive image.

¹¹ "Senior Chinese officials learn to deal with media", *China Daily*, 3 January 2008.

¹² "Speech by Cai Wu, Minister of the State Council Information Office", *China Internet Information Centre*, 27 December 2007 (<http://www.china.org.cn/e-news/news071227.htm>).

¹³ "Foreign media get rare visit to Chinese army unit", *Straits Times*, 31 July 2007.

- 2.10 The second purpose behind the media liberalization measures is for China to proactively shape how the foreign media perceives and reports on the country. Previously, foreign journalists had much difficulty accessing timely and accurate information due to Chinese officials' reticence to engage the press. With the institutionalization of the news briefing and spokesman system, China can present its own interpretation of events to the foreign media. This mindset change reflects China's confidence in handling the foreign media. Third, China seeks to be a constructive partner to the foreign media by allowing them greater access to the country. This indicates China's willingness to adhere to international norms with its increasing integration with the world.

Legitimacy Building through the Local Media

- 3.1 Although official attention appears to be on engaging the foreign media, it is the local media that the government attaches more importance to. In the past, the local media was a key instrument used by the Party and government to convey their thinking, views and policies top-down to the masses. This was its primary function. To some extent, the local media was also responsible for relaying upwards to the top leadership the concerns and expectations of the masses. But this function was secondary.
- 3.2 In recent years, the local media's function in reflecting the concerns and expectations of ordinary people has gained in importance. This is the result of the pro-people orientation (以人为本) of the Hu-Wen leadership. As early as February 2003, Hu Jintao proposed the new "three people's principles" (新三民主义), i.e. exercise power for the people, show concern for the people and work for the people's interests (权为民所用、情为民所系、利为民所谋). In March 2003, Hu exhorted the local media to report more on the people so that it can be "closer to reality, closer to the masses and closer to daily life" (贴近实际、贴近群众、贴近生活).
- 3.3 The pro-people orientation is at the core of the scientific outlook on development that seeks to balance economic growth with social and

environmental considerations. The political report of the 17th Party Congress stressed the importance of guaranteeing the people's right to be informed, to participate, to be heard and to oversee (保障人民的知情权、参与权、表达权、监督权) in accordance with the law.¹⁴ The ability of the people to exercise these rights is closely related to the role of the local media.

- 3.4 At the implementation level, the Party and government have accorded the local media and public a greater role in improving official accountability and transparency. The most significant move in this direction is the provision on the disclosure of government information (政府信息公开条例) that came into effect in May 2008. The regulation, first suggested in 1999, went through arduous rounds of debate and review before it was adopted by the State Council in January last year.
- 3.5 According to the provision, governments at various levels are required to proactively release information in four main categories, namely, those concerning the immediate interests of individuals and organizations; those requiring the public's knowledge and participation; those relating to the government administrative structure, functions and processes; and, those requiring release in accordance with the country's laws and regulations.¹⁵ The regulation is an achievement given the official penchant to leave things undefined. The challenge, as always, is to ensure that what is contained in the regulation is actually carried out in practice.
- 3.6 The local media is also encouraged to report on officials who fail to abide by standards set by the Party or government. In particular, the local media has helped to expose the crimes of errant or corrupt officials, and criticize local governments' failure to implement government policies, such as those related to environmental protection. Since 2004, the public can also get in touch with

¹⁴ "Hu Jintao zai dangde shiqida shangde baogao" (Hu Jintao's political report at the 17th Party Congress), *Xinhuanet*, 24 October 2007 (http://news.xinhuanet.com/newscenter/2007-10/24/content_6938568_5.htm).

¹⁵ Some of the priority areas listed by the provision for public release include administrative regulations, national economic and social development plans, government budget, specific fees for administrative services, emergency plans of government departments and the results of investigations into environmental protection, public health, food and drug safety issues.

the local party organization department (地区党委组织部门) by dialing a hotline to report on irregularities in the selection and appointment of local leaders.¹⁶

3.7 The greater leeway granted to the local media and public fits in with the Party and government's overall agenda to stamp corruption and abuse of power, as well as achieve sustainable development. At times, where excesses are exposed, either with or without official sanction, the relevant Party and government agencies have been quick to address the problems and restore normalcy. Guided by a more astute appreciation of the power of the media, the Party and government are increasingly aware that quick action is needed to limit the political fallout from any public incident and shore up its legitimacy in the eyes of the public.¹⁷

3.8 One such example was the huge public outcry over the use of slave labor at brick kilns in Shanxi in May 2007.¹⁸ This led to swift government actions to free the victims and to implement harsh punishment on the perpetrators. A nationwide effort was also mounted to free forced labor trapped elsewhere. Another example of official astuteness in handling media revelation of social problems was the nail house episode in Chongqing.¹⁹ The owners of the house who refused to move epitomized the interests of ordinary people standing up to big business. Given this significance, the authorities were careful not to appear high-handed. When a settlement was reached, the state media was

¹⁶ The hotline no. is 12380. See“ ‘12380’: Rang qunzhong jiandu de qudao geng changtong” (12380: To make the public's supervision channel smoother), *People's Daily*, 13 April 2007.

¹⁷ Such pro-activeness contrasts with the initial lackluster response of the Chinese authorities to the outbreak of SARS in 2003.

¹⁸ News of slave labor being used at brick kilns in Shanxi first appeared on the Internet. Subsequently, Henan Television, a media organization of the Henan provincial government, telecasted this news in May 2007.

¹⁹ The nail house gained widespread attention on the national media and particularly on the Internet in the first half of 2007 after the homeowners repeatedly ignored eviction orders to vacate their house to make way for development.

quick to stress the amicable resolution due to active mediation efforts of the municipal government and relevant departments.²⁰

- 3.9 Besides its public role, there is the less well-known but more important role that the local media plays behind the scenes. The local media, may at its own initiative or when instructed from above, write internal assessment reports on socio-economic trends with implications for the country. These unpublished reports are circulated upwards through the Party and government apparatus by the senior management of the local media. How high up the political system these reports go would depend on the discretion of the immediate political leaders reading them. Essentially, these internal reports provide important reference material for relevant Party and governmental leaders to make informed decisions affecting the masses.

“Bird Cage” Theory of Media Freedom

- 4.1 The media liberalization measures in the local and foreign media scene in China mentioned above are occurring within the tight framework of media control. The key institutions of media control, namely, the State Administration of Radio, Film and Television, the General Administration of Press and Publication, the Ministry of Information Industry and the SCIO on the government side, and more importantly, the Party’s Publicity Department, still have much say over what can or cannot be published, how particular news events ought to be reported and what punitive measures to impose on errant media organizations or individuals.²¹
- 4.2 In particular, the media authorities still adopt a rather uncompromising stand against Chinese individuals or media organizations that flout reporting parameters. They usually justify any punitive action taken by citing the need to safeguard state interests or the importance of maintaining social and

²⁰ “Chongqing ‘dingzihu’ caile” (Chongqing nail house is demolished), *People’s Daily*, 3 April 2007.

²¹ For details on the institutions of media control, please see Zheng Yongnian and Lye Liang Fook, “China’s Propaganda Reforms (I): Rapid Changes in Media Scene”, *EAI Background Brief*, No. 201, 2 August 2004.

political stability. From the perspective of the Publicity Department, the action taken is for the public good. Often, the Publicity Department tightens its grip on the eve of controversial anniversaries (e.g. the June 4th incident in 1989) or major events (e.g. 17th Party Congress in October 2007).

- 4.3 Last year, two officially affiliated publications were forced to restructure and change their content after publishing news which the Publicity Department considered too sensitive. *Baixing* (百姓), a monthly publication under the Ministry of Agriculture, had to remove its editor-in-chief and some journalists after it carried articles revealing corruption and forced land eviction cases in the countryside. Another publication, *Lifeweek* (生活周刊), a weekly magazine of state-owned Sanlian Book Publication Group, received six demerit points (out of 12) for violating a propaganda directive not to play up politically sensitive topics. The magazine had published stories on the Cultural Revolution and the Tangshan earthquake.²²
- 4.4 Besides the dismissal of individuals or the restructuring of media organizations that flout reporting parameters, the media authorities and other officials have resorted to more coercive measures including house arrests, imprisonment or harassment of Chinese journalists or activists to maintain control. In August 2007, five Chinese journalists covering a bridge collapse that killed 47 people in Fenghuang County in Hunan were reportedly harassed by a group of unidentified people who were later identified as local officials.²³ In other less clear cut instances, Chinese journalists could be attacked by thugs hired by local officials to prevent them from reporting a particular event. It is often difficult to prove a connection between the thugs and local officials.
- 4.5 Such punitive measures are not confined to local journalists. Foreign journalists have also encountered obstacles even after reporting restrictions were eased in January 2007 although their treatment appears relatively less

²² The Tangshan earthquake that reportedly took 240,000 lives serves as a reminder of the Party's failure to render immediate and adequate assistance to assist the victims and their families when it struck.

²³ "Chinese reporters covering bridge collapse beaten", *Agence France Presse*, 17 August 2007.

harsh. Two *Agence France Presse* reporters were reportedly detained for five hours in September 2007 when they tried to go to Shengyou, a village south of Beijing, where thugs apparently working for local Party officials killed six people and injured about 50 others in a dispute over land in 2005.²⁴ Separately, in March 2007, two BBC journalists who went to Zhushan in Hunan to report on rioting that had just taken place there in protest against an increase in public transport fares were arrested by local policemen. They were admonished for failing to get permission before going to Zhushan.²⁵

4.6 In general, the official tendency is to restrain the reporting of sensitive news. There are still many topics either considered taboo or too sensitive that caution is preferred when reporting such as those relating to protests, land acquisition, natural disasters and dissident activities. Unbridled reporting of these sensitive topics may embarrass the local government or Party organizations, or worse still, generate too much negative publicity for China. Hence, relevant authorities are often inclined to err on the safe side. This is normally the case unless otherwise specifically instructed by the political leadership higher up.

4.7 Apart from traditional media, China is quick to capitalize on new media channels such as blogging and chat rooms on the Internet to further its political reach. Early last year, Hu Jintao called on officials to promote and better regulate rapidly developing Internet services so as to "actively and creatively nurture a healthy online culture".²⁶ The authorities have approached the Internet in two main ways. One approach is to maintain some control over the Internet to ensure its orderly development. The control measures range

²⁴ "Arrests and incidents involving foreign journalists show government is not keeping Olympic Games promises", *Reporters Sans Frontiers*, 14 September 2007 (http://www.rsf.org/article.php3?id_article=23667).

²⁵ "Disturbing lapses in application of new rules for foreign media", *Reporters Sans Frontiers*, 22 March 2007 (http://www.rsf.org/article.php3?id_article=21394).

²⁶ "President Hu Jintao asks officials to better cope with Internet", *Xinhuanet*, 24 January 2007 (http://news.xinhuanet.com/english/2007-01/24/content_5648674.htm)

from the less onerous ones such as requiring local websites to be registered,²⁷ instructing search engines companies to remove offensive and banned online content, and blocking access to websites to more serious measures like shutting down websites²⁸ and arresting cyber dissidents²⁹ critical of the regime.

- 4.8 The other approach is to tap the Internet to reach out to the masses in view of its increasing accessibility. Already, China's Internet population reached 210 million by end 2007, up 35 per cent from the 137 million users in 2006. Of the 73 million new users, 29.2 million, or 40 per cent lived in rural areas.³⁰ Given the impressive growth of Internet users, the Party and government officials are quick to tap its potential. In February 2007, Hunan's Party Secretary Zhang Chunxian sent his Lunar New Year greetings to local residents via a local web portal. Going further, in June 2007, Chongqing's Party Chief Wang Yang and Mayor Wang Hongju wrote an open letter on the city's Internet website to solicit online suggestions on achieving balanced development between the municipality's urban and rural areas.

Whither Media Freedom?

- 5.1 The liberalization measures introduced over the years in the foreign and local media scene in China do not amount to a policy change on media freedom. They can more accurately be described as administrative adjustments or shifts in approaches in handling the media in line with prevailing needs and circumstances.

²⁷ A total of 199,000 websites were registered by the authorities in 2007, but another 14,000 were refused access to the Internet for failing to get official registration or to apply for official approval. See "China closes 44,000 pornographic websites in 2007", *China Daily*, 23 January 2008.

²⁸ In July 2007, the *China Development Brief*, a popular Beijing-based Internet news site with western NGOs that focuses on social issues in China such as spread of AIDS, slave labor and press freedom, was forced to shut down. See *China Development Brief* at <http://www.chinadevelopmentbrief.com/node/508>.

²⁹ In one recent case, Lu Gengsong, a former lecturer turned dissident, was arrested in September 2007 for allegedly subverting state power. Lu has disclosed many illegal eviction cases involving provincial and city officials who colluded with real estate developers. See "China arrests cyber-dissident", *Agence France Presse*, 1 October 2007.

³⁰ "China's netizen population to be world's largest", *China Daily*, 17 January 2008.

- 5.2 On the foreign media front, it is likely that the easing of reporting restrictions and other measures to improve media-related services will continue after the Beijing Olympics. This is because the political leadership and media authorities have other ways of managing the foreign media within China. Also, continuing with the media liberalization measures would demonstrate that China has made progress in creating a more conducive environment for the foreign media without conceding ground on the policy front.
- 5.3 As for the local media, the media liberalization process is less discernible. On the one hand, the top leadership has exhorted the media to be truthful and reflect ground realities. Indeed, the local media has been accorded a bigger role to supervise official conduct and report on official excesses. On the other hand, the local media is expected to exercise self restraint in its reporting. Should they cross reporting red lines, they are liable to be punished. The Publicity Department will step up its vigilance and censure any news that will or can reflect negatively on China in the run-up to the Beijing Olympics.³¹
- 5.4 It may be argued that the series of media liberalization measures are largely driven by China's desire to put forth its best showing, and thereby raise its international stature in the run-up to and during the Olympic Games. To some extent, this is true and China can be expected to introduce more positive gestures in the future. However, while the Olympic factor is a major incentive for positive action on China's part, this alone does not fully explain China's motivation.
- 5.5 There are broader socio-economic factors at play which the Party and government have to contend with. The three decades of open door and reform policy have led to a differentiation of social classes more aware of their rights as citizens. They want more say in areas that impact on their daily lives. Moreover, the success of high economic growth over the years has generated externalities such as widening regional and income gaps, rampant corruption

³¹ There are already indications that the Chinese media authorities have instructed the state media to exercise restraint in the coverage of schools that collapsed in the Sichuan earthquake in May 2008.

and environmental degradation that affect ordinary people. As a result, they have more reason and are more willing to express their views.

5.6 The Chinese people are now also better informed about what is happening inside and outside China. More and more Chinese are travelling overseas for work, study and leisure. Last year, 41 million Chinese travelled overseas, up 18.6 per cent from 2006.³² Furthermore, the Chinese have access to alternative sources of news with the growth of information technology. As a result, they can better apprise how much socio-economic and even political progress they have made and how far behind they remain. The official propaganda that used to hold sway over people's mindset and behavior now have to compete for attention with many other available sources of information.

5.7 As China moves towards a more balanced phase of economic development, the Party and government will give greater weight to bottom-up views in policy making. In this regard, the role of the media, especially the local media, in reporting on socio-economic issues and reflecting on the people's thinking and concerns will gain in importance. The leadership will also want to tap the reach of the local media, both traditional and new media channels, to better involve the masses in making decisions that affect them. By staying relevant and creating a more inclusive society, or appearing to create one, the Party is ensuring stability and its continued dominance in Chinese politics.

³²

"Outbound tourism sector to open wider", *China Daily*, 19 January 2008.

APPENDIX 1 OVERVIEW OF THE NEWS BRIEFING AND SPOKESMAN SYSTEM

Year	No. of Press Conferences Held			Party Organizations	Total No. of Press Conferences Held (A+B+C)
	State Council Information Office ^A	Various Departments under the State Council ^B	Provincial Governments ^C		
2007	72	547 (involving 74 departments with 96 spokesmen)	789 (involving 31 provincial governments with 60 spokesmen)	Involving 6 organizations with 7 spokesmen*	1408
2006	58	506 (involving 74 departments with 91 spokesmen)	757 (involving 31 provincial governments with 52 spokesmen)	Involving 6 organizations with 7 spokesmen*	1321
2005	68	390 (involving 69 departments with 86 spokesmen)	630 (involving 27 provincial governments)	Nil	1088
2004	60	270 (involving 62 departments with 75 spokesmen)	> 460 (involving 23 provincial governments)	Nil	Close to 900
2003	41	N.A.	N.A.	Nil	N.A.

Source: Author's own compilation from the *China Internet Information Center* at <http://www.china.org.cn/e-news/>.

C: Provincial governments here refer to the provinces, autonomous regions and municipalities

*: The 6 Party organizations here include the Central Commission for Discipline Inspection, the United Front Work Department, the International Department, the Taiwan Work Office, the Literature Research Center and the History Research Center.