

HUMAN RIGHTS UPDATES:

Radio Free Asia

Citizen Journalism 'On The Rise'

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A growing number of Chinese netizens are turning to citizen journalism to disseminate information.

HONG KONG—Citizen journalism in China is thriving in spite of tight government controls on official media and a speedy censorship system that blocks content the ruling Communist Party doesn't like, experts said.

"There's a lot of motivation in China right now for the fight against corruption," said Zhu Ruifeng, editor-in-chief of the anti-corruption Web site Supervision by the People.

"Particularly on the Internet ... netizens have been using public supervision to force some departments into probing corrupt officials. This strong force against corruption would never have got so large if it hadn't been for citizens working online," Zhu said.

Chinese spend more time online than netizens in any other country with the exception of France and South Korea, and are more likely to contribute to blogs, forums, chat rooms, and other social media like photo and video-sharing sites, recent surveys show.

"The ordinary citizen ... doesn't need any special powers or technical ability," said Hunan-based citizen journalist and blogger Zhou Shuguang. "All that is required is that you have some ability to access Internet services, for example social media services like Facebook or Twitter, in order to gather, edit and disseminate news."

"Anyone can become a citizen reporter, and sometimes they can follow up clues in the news, or take news reports a bit further," said Zhou, who shot to fame for his one-man coverage of a "nailhouse" home-owner who held out against big-time property developers in the southwestern city of Chongqing.

Alternative to state media

Xiao Qiang, director of the China Internet Project and an adjunct professor at the Graduate School of Journalism, University of California, Berkeley, said citizen journalism, in which ordinary people take the news into their own hands, has closely followed the expansion of Chinese Internet users, who now number around 390 million.

"The use of blogging, BBS forums and even more the microblogging services etc really has become very commonplace," Xiao said. "More and more people are able to use the Internet to disseminate information."

Xiao said that China's tight censorship controls meant that individuals and grass-roots activists seeking to make public information could have a disproportionate impact on a society where people were constantly on the lookout for alternate news sources to state-controlled official media outlets.

"Sometimes all that a citizen journalist has to do is take a cell phone to a hotspot where a newsworthy event is taking place, because she or he will be able to report on matters that the official mainstream media will be forbidden to report on," he said.

"Chinese bloggers are operating in an excellent technological environment, even though the political environment is difficult...and this gives the citizen journalism movement in China a huge amount of potential space to develop further."

Advancing democratization

Grassroots activist Zhu Ruifeng agreed that his work would not exist without the Internet.

"[Without it] we would have no channel—there would be nowhere for my voice to be heard; nowhere for my articles to be published," Zhu said. "That's why we say thank you to the Internet on a regular basis."

Zhou said netizens are now in the habit of recording their experiences, conflicts and day-to-day news events online, and that ordinary people are becoming more aware of the news value of daily events.

"I think that this shows a change in the consciousness of ordinary people, and it will do a lot to advance social progress, by raising the level of cultivation in society, by fighting corruption, and by helping to protect people's rights and welfare," he said.

"It will also help to advance democratization. This growth and development of citizen journalism and citizen media will provide a huge boost to the establishment of a civil society as well."

China's 50 million bloggers are frequently subjected to censorship by their Internet service providers, but politically sensitive material also routinely falls through the cracks as individual companies interpret government guidelines in their own way, recent studies have shown.

But Zhou said the capital of mainstream media in China had been permanently undermined, despite continuing controls.

And according to Xiao Qiang, "information relating to grass-roots activism among ordinary people has also become very widespread."

"We are now seeing news, information and opinion and commentary that is not reported or released by the official media appearing online, including photographs, video etc, gradually beginning to appear online," he said.

"This phenomenon is filling the gaps and insufficiencies in official media coverage—the areas where it can't report things."

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Independent journalism stands firm

Reporters face uphill battle but refuse to be muzzled in exposing market corruption

Cary Huang in Beijing

May 27, 2010

An increasingly assertive media has been exposing some dark corners of the mainland's experiment with capitalism, with predictably authoritarian results.

But when Equity Market Weekly, run by SEEC Media Group - a Hong Kong-listed mainland company which also owns other business publications including the more prominent Caijing magazine - last month apologised for a story alleging that an investment fund had paid for overseas trips by market regulators, it was a step too far for the magazine's senior staff, who threatened to resign.

The revolt at the weekly highlights the determination of some mainland journalists to pursue independent journalism but also the difficulties those reporters face in standing up to powerful mainland ministries.

The storm clouds began gathering early last month when an elderly woman and her son appeared on China Central Television alleging that Li Li, deputy director of the China Securities Regulatory Commission's (CSRC) legal department, had engaged in insider trading. The woman and her son, Li's ex-husband, later produced a mobile phone SIM card and documents that indicated Li was its owner.

They accused her of leaking classified information about a listed company, Sanyi, through a text message the day before the company released its annual report.

Li rejected their claim, telling a news website on Sina, the mainland's largest Web portal, that she had not used the SIM card.

Three days after the CCTV show, an unidentified CSRC official was quoted as saying that Li's ex-husband had filed a complaint in 2008 but no basis had been found for it, with no Sanyi shares having been traded by Li's mother or Li's ex-husband during their marriage.

The CSRC representative said companies submitted their results announcements and dividend proposals directly to the exchange; they did not need to run them past the commission for approval.

But the story did not stop there. Days later, a follow-up investigative report by Equity Market Weekly suggested China International Fund Management, a joint venture between Shanghai International Trust & Investment and JPMorgan Asset Management (UK), had paid for European sightseeing tours by Li and fellow commission officials.

The officials were said to have checked into the Concorde La Fayette hotel in Paris and were pictured in front of famous European landmarks - the Thames, the London Eye and the Moulin Rouge nightclub - and toasting one another at bars in Belgium and Luxembourg. The officials were allegedly accompanied by a senior executive from China International Fund Management.

Shortly after running the story, headlined "The fall of CSRC officials", the magazine issued an apology saying there was no truth in the report and the headline was unfounded.

But in a dramatic twist, most of the editors and senior editorial staff at Equity Market Weekly handed resignation letters to management, sticking by the accuracy of their report and saying the apology was the result of political intervention by the commission. The magazine is not run by the commission but insiders said management could not afford to offend the regulator.

The threatened mass resignations were another setback for SEEC, headed by former investment banker Wang Boming, and came just a few months after prominent journalist Hu Shuli left Caijing. Her abrupt departure in November was linked to a disagreement with company management over editorial direction as well as over the shares ownership distribution among editorial staff. The magazine was known for its exposure of a series of stock market scandals. Hu took nearly 80 per cent of the editorial staff with her and founded a new weekly magazine.

In the latest development, SEEC management and Equity Market Weekly reached a compromise last week. Chen Delin, an assistant editor at Equity Market Weekly, said most staff decided to stay after management agreed to take action to correct their mistake and promised not to interfere in editorial independence again.

"We all felt like we had been raped after management issued the apology despite strong opposition from all senior editorial staff," Chen said.

Chen - an award-winning journalist and author of books on China's failing stock exchanges, including one on the scandal surrounding disgraced Gome boss Wong Kwong-yu (also known as Huang Guangyu) - described the result as a win for independent journalism.

The management agreed to fire Yang Lang, the former deputy director of publication, who is accused of insisting on publishing the apology against the will of editorial staff.

The management also agreed to restructure the editorial board and allow more journalists to sit on the board. Previously most committee members came from company management, which make decisions on editorial affairs.

Since their debut two decades ago, the mainland's stock markets have been known for widespread insider trading, false information scams, fraud, bribery and corruption involving government officials, regulators and listed companies.

Tom Orlik, an analyst with Beijing-based Stone & McCarthy Research Associates, said the allegations aired by CCTV underlined the difficulty and importance of ensuring fair play in the mainland's infant equity markets.

Analysts said the CSRC's response to Li's case last month did not answer questions about whether other relatives or friends had bought Sanyu shares. "Even if none of them traded on it, any leaking of price-sensitive information prior to an announcement is against the law," a senior executive with a leading securities firm said.

Analysts said rooting out market corruption was a daunting task, considering how deeply the practice was entrenched in mainland society.

"Investors are used to the market practices, seeing it going on around them," the securities executive said.

Zhang Ming, a professor of political science at Renmin University, said retail investors resented the way relatives of top officials got hold of state-owned assets through their positions and viewed the stock market as one of the main channels for such shady practices.

But the bigger issue, Chen said, was the urgent need to restructure the market regulator to stop widespread malpractices, because "the commission is too powerful to be supervised and checked".

Chen said commission officials were both players and referees because the commission was in charge of regulating the market but also had the power to approve initial public offers. He said the magazine's apology suggested the commission was expanding its clout in an attempt to influence the media.

No break Through with US

By FOSTER KLUG (AP) – 15 May 2010

WASHINGTON — The United States and China reported no major breakthroughs Friday after only their second round of talks about human rights since 2002.

The Obama administration wants to push Beijing to treat its citizens better, but it also needs Chinese support on Iranian and North Korean nuclear standoffs, climate change and other difficult issues.

A senior U.S. official said that the two-day meeting lays groundwork for more regular talks to soothe an irritant in relations between the two world powers.

Michael Posner, the assistant secretary of state, told reporters that another round will happen some time next year in Beijing. The countries also plan to hold talks on legal matters soon and he said he will participate in a high-profile economic and security summit in Beijing this month.

"In two days, we're not going to change major policies or major points of view, but we laid a foundation to continue," Posner said. "The tone of the discussions was very much, 'We're two powerful, great countries. We have a range of issues that we are engaged on. Human rights is part of that discussion, and it will remain so.'"

This week's talks came as the countries try to repair ties after a rough period. President Barack Obama infuriated China by recently announcing a \$6.4 billion arms sale to Taiwan, the self-ruled island claimed by Beijing as its own, and by meeting with the Dalai Lama, the exiled Tibetan Buddhist leader China calls a separatist.

Posner said in addition to talks on freedom of religion and expression, labor rights and rule of law, officials also discussed Chinese complaints about problems with U.S. human rights, which have included crime, poverty, homelessness and racial discrimination.

He said U.S. officials did not whitewash the American record and in fact raised on its own a new immigration law in Arizona that requires police to ask about a person's immigration status if there is suspicion the person is in the country illegally.

The United States was represented by officials from the State Department, White House, the departments of Commerce, Justice, Homeland Security, Labor, the trade representative's office and the Internal Revenue Service. The Chinese side was led by Director General for International Organizations Chen Xu and included officials from nine agencies.

The officials discussed Tibet, the Uighur (pronounced WEE'-gur) ethnic group in the Chinese province of Xinjiang and specific dissidents the United States has worries about. Posner would not provide details, except to say the United States raised the cases of Liu Xiaobo, an author-dissident serving an 11-year prison sentence on subversion charges, and Gao Zhisheng, a crusading Chinese rights lawyer.

Todd Stein, with the International Campaign for Tibet, said political repression in China is growing. If officials want improvement in China's human rights record, he said, the issue should be a focus of this month's high-profile Strategic and Economic Dialogue in Beijing.

"It would be a mistake if this dialogue resulted in a 'check the box' exercise that sidelined substantive engagement on human rights in any other arena," Stein said in a statement.

The officials spent part of Friday traveling around Washington for meetings, including, Posner said, a visit to the U.S. Supreme Court, where they were briefed by retired Justice Sandra Day O'Connor on rule of law.

Jon Huntsman, U.S. ambassador to China who was in Washington, told reporters earlier Friday that the rights talks are a useful way to get results on tough issues.

"We're talking about issues that are uncomfortable, quite frankly, but it is a sign of maturity that we can talk about specific cases," Huntsman said.

VOA - Voice of America News

Obama Administration Prepares for China Human Rights Dialogue

David Gollust | State Department - 10 May 2010

U.S. and Chinese officials convene in Washington later this week for a new round of what has been a sporadic bilateral human rights dialogue. Some U.S. human rights advocates are skeptical about the dialogue process.

The United States and China are resuming the human rights dialogue for the first time in two years, with the State Department meetings seen as another sign relations are stabilizing after months of tensions.

Assistant Secretary of State for Democracy, Human Rights and Labor, Michael Posner, will lead the U.S. team in meetings Thursday and Friday. China's delegation will be headed by Foreign Affairs Ministry Director-General for International Organizations, Chen Xu.

The meeting was first scheduled for February but was postponed amid Chinese anger over new U.S. arms sales to Taiwan and President Obama's meeting with exiled Tibetan spiritual leader the Dalai Lama.

The last such dialogue was in May 2008. Before that, discussions had not taken place since 2002.

State Department Spokesman P.J. Crowley says the meetings are not about lecturing China on rights issues, but to help it understand why those issues are of importance to Washington.

Crowley says the meeting on human rights issues will be held separately. But he added that does not mean that human rights will not be part of the U.S. agenda during a two-day strategic and economic dialogue that begins in Beijing on May 23.

"Our relationship with China is broad, it's deep," said P.J. Crowley. "It covers a number of areas. Human rights is a central element to that. So as part of the strategic dialogue, human rights is a

dimension of that. It's part of the economic dialogue. Issues that touch on human rights whether its Internet freedom, access to information, intellectual property rights - these are all fundamental to this discussion."

U.S. rights groups say any discussion of the issue with China is welcome given what the State Department's own annual human rights report said in March was a poor Chinese record that in some cases worsened last year.

But Scott Flipse, Director of East Asia Policy and Programs at the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom, or USCIRF, says working level meetings on human rights are not worthwhile, if they only produce agreements to continue talking.

Flipse says U.S. concerns on China human rights issues would be more effectively raised by Secretary of State Hillary Clinton at the Beijing strategic dialogue.

"Our position is that we think that religious freedom issues need to be taken up at the strategic and economic dialogue, and there needs to be a consistent government-wide human rights strategy that is created, so that the Chinese do not get the message that our interest in human rights are somehow not connected to all of our other interests," said Scott Flipse.

The Congressionally chartered USCIRF issued a report this month saying China continues to engage in "systematic and egregious" violations of freedom of religion or belief, with a "marked deterioration" of conditions in Tibetan Buddhist and Muslim Uighur areas.

It recommended U.S. sanctions targeting Chinese provincial leaders where rights violations are most severe.

Sophie Richardson, Asia advocacy director for Human Rights Watch, calls the bilateral rights dialogues "fairly empty exercises" because they lack benchmarks for progress and a meaningful connection with the broader U.S.-China relationship.

Nevertheless, Richardson says the Beijing government's evident dislike for the dialogues shows they are not entirely without value.

"One of main reasons to go head with the human rights dialogue is that the Chinese government doesn't like it," said Sophie Richardson. "They don't like having to sit through this thing once or twice a year. And while that doesn't necessarily turn it into a constructive, meaningful discussion, I think that alone is reason enough to try to continue to have the discussion."

T. Kumar, international advocacy director for Amnesty International-USA, says the bilateral rights dialogues are "better than nothing", but that the issue should also be part of the upcoming ministerial talks.

"We urge the Obama administration to include as an equal partner with other interests that they are going to discuss in this strategic dialogue," said Kumar. "That's the most important and

comprehensive way of addressing human rights in China. Separating human rights from that main engagement will send the wrong signal. Number two: the Chinese will also not take this seriously."

The Amnesty official says China's rights record is static in most areas and getting worse in others, especially for Uighurs in western Xinjiang province and for human rights lawyers.

The sole bright spot he cited was China's 2007 decision to reinstate a Supreme Court review of all death penalty cases, a step he says may have slowed the world-leading pace of executions in China.

China has raised complaints about the U.S. human rights performance at past dialogues.

After the March release of the State Department's human rights report, China accused the U.S. government of turning a blind eye to "rampant" abuses, citing violent crime, police brutality, and government spying on Americans in the name of fighting terrorism.

South China Morning Post

I had to leave, Aids activist says

Verna Yu

May 10, 2010

Wan Yanhai, the mainland's leading activist on Aids and sexual minorities, has left China for the US with his family, saying harassment from the authorities has forced him into a self-imposed exile.

The director of the Aizhixing Institute - arguably the mainland's most vocal NGO - told the South China Morning Post (SEHK: 0583, announcements, news) that he and his family arrived in Los Angeles on Thursday night last week. For now, he is staying at a friend's place in Philadelphia.

"Before we left China, I was under a lot of pressure and was harassed by many [government] departments," Wan said in a phone interview late on Saturday.

Wan said not only had the local tax, commerce and industry bureaus investigated his group in recent months, but the fire department had also visited his office checking if any regulations had been breached. Beijing police also made dozens of phone calls to him last month and visited his home when he was out of town, he said.

Phone calls to the departments went unanswered yesterday.

"I felt my personal safety was at stake," he said. "The mental pressure was just too much, so I've come out for a bit of breathing space."

Wan said his family had not received political or financial assistance from the US. He said he and his wife were travelling on business visas that were issued in September when they went to the United States for an alumni reunion at Yale University. Wan was on the Yale World Fellows Programme in 2003.

Wan said he hoped to seek short-term research positions or fellowships at universities in the US to maintain his family. His four-year-old daughter is with them.

He said he would also seek collaboration with international organisations to look for ways for the Aizhixing Institute to continue receiving overseas financial aid.

Asked whether his departure would affect the morale of his staff and fellow Aids activists, Wan admitted this might happen but believed his staff would be capable of running projects smoothly in his absence.

"Even if I hadn't left, I wouldn't be able to carry on working normally," he said. "I kept getting phone calls from the police and five, six government departments are after me - I just could not concentrate on my work."

Wan said he did not know the reason behind the harassment but believed officials may be sending a message that they would like him to leave the country.

"I'm not sure but it looks like they might be forcing me to leave ... the aim of the harassment is probably to give you pressure so you'll leave of your own accord," he said.

Wan's fellow Aids campaigner, Dr Gao Yaojie, the mainland's most high-profile HIV/Aids whistleblower, also left China for the US last year.

Another fellow activist, Hu Jia, was sentenced to three-and-a-half years in prison on the charge of "inciting subversion of state authority" in 2008.

While acknowledging that the central government has also made significant progress in its Aids projects, Wan said it did not like criticism, especially when it could potentially embarrass officials. Wan had accused provincial officials in Henan of covering up a blood-selling scandal in which at least 150,000 people became HIV-positive.

"If you criticise them and tell the truth about the blood [contamination], they'll persecute you," he said.

Wan said he did not know how long he could stay in the US, but hoped to remain for two or three years. "In China, I was a bird in a cage ... by leaving China I'll be out of their control and they might have more consideration for your influence," he said.