

Breaking News In China

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How the Economist saw China

China is making headlines around the world in many ways. The global media is fascinated by recent tales of alleged corruption and human rights abuse as well some signs that the all-mighty China economy might be stuttering. At the same time China – through the state broadcaster CCTV – is about to invest billions in new global media services.

Now I am not a China media expert, I don't even speak the language(s), but I've just learnt a lot on a fascinating trip to Beijing to talk to a range of journalists. While I was there two huge stories were still reverberating around global media.

As I made my way very slowly through Beijing's extraordinary traffic jams the campaigning lawyer [Chen Guangchen](#) was still facing persecution after an attempt to find sanctuary with US diplomats. And news magazines around the world were still sifting the significance of the bizarre tale of the fall from grace of top regional politician Bo Xilai. The web of corruption around him allegedly included the murder of a police chief by his wife. You won't, of course, read much about that in the Chinese media nor see little of it on CCTV.

But the Chinese people do know about it, largely thanks to their version of Twitter, Sina Weibo. Everyone tells you that despite heavy recent clampdowns, Weibo has revolutionised information flows through the People's Republic. Yes, the authorities can block keywords and sometimes identify users for reprisals. But overall stories can at least see daylight before they are banned. Censorship is now post-hoc.

Self-made Censorship

Of course, most censorship is self-made. It is a combination of bureaucracy, policing and the allocation of resources. Chinese journalists are accountable ultimately to Party propaganda departments so it is pretty pointless to try to publish really challenging material. Criticism of malfeasance at a local level is encouraged but open debate about macro politics is not allowed except in a sanctioned code.

This is why the creation of international TV channels by CCTV is so interesting. From my meetings it is clear that there are some very talented and enthusiastic Chinese journalists who understand all about social media and the potential of new global platforms. Some of them will be joining the teams opening up new stations in Washington and Europe this year. What will their journalism be like?

The evidence so far of CCTV's international non-Chinese language output is that it mimics American-style rolling news meticulously. Their business programmes sometimes seem like a slightly surreal theatre production where someone has taken a US cable financial news show and staged it with Chinese presenters.

What's Going On?

The problem for CCTV is how to make it worth watching for non-Chinese audiences. Of course, we are all interested in China but is CCTV going to tell us what is really going on? And, again, we are all curious to know how the Chinese see the rest of the world, but will they offer the kind of journalism that will build a real audience for their global channels?

If you look at a global media success such as Al Jazeera you can see that it adds value. Al Jaz has a distinctive take

on the world thanks to its Middle Eastern roots and its market positioning as an 'outsider' alternative to its competitors.

Like Al Jazeera, CCTV is also hiring western journalists. It will be interesting to see what kind of editorial mix they produce with their Chinese colleagues as they seek to provide a different window on the world.

Open Spaces?

Back [in 2009 I argued](#) that market forces within China media might open up spaces for a more free media. I think that the expansion of CCTV's global services could have a similar effect.

I do not mean to be naive. China's path of development is unique and should not be related too closely to a simplistic Western model. Freedom of expression is probably as difficult in China as it has been for some time. However, I am as interested in the evolution of journalistic culture as I am in absolute ideas of human rights. In that sense, I would argue that things are going to get a lot more interesting for Chinese journalists as well as global audiences.

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