


China and Tibet: how to manage the media

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 China has responded to universal coverage of unrest in Tibet with an attempt to [restrict](#) access to the Internet. An expert in 'filtering' the Internet in Iran told me this morning that the Chinese are better at this because they built their Internet systems, while the Iranians attempted to control a system that was already in place. He says that neither work perfectly because they tend to censor using keywords. And anyway, there is always a minority of geeks who can find a way around the filters.

The Chinese are relatively subtle about this as [BBC World Service's](#) Mark Pruszewicz explains:

As a presenter began reading the introduction to a report on events in Tibet, screens in China showing BBC World would suddenly go black. It wasn't consistent – some reports would go out unmolested one hour, only to be taken off air the next. Whenever the channel moved onto other stories, normal service was resumed. Nevertheless it was clear reporting on the story was incurring the wrath of the censors.

I had a fascinating insight into the thinking behind this at lunch with a very media literate official from the Chinese embassy recently. He was understandably worried about bad press for Beijing in the run-up to this summer's Olympics. It is obvious that Tibetan campaigners are using the Games for leverage. A riot or two right now will have far more effect than a riot last year or next. This is partly because of the Games but more generally it is true that China is becoming acutely conscious of the value of a good reputation when it comes to international business and diplomacy.

My lunch guest from the Chinese embassy was seeking advice from me about how to 'deal' with the media. I pointed out that he could always try being open and honest and giving them as much access and information as was possible. I also suggested that it might not be a good thing to go around locking up journalists or protestors because that only encourages the media in its belief that China is not a free country.

I also said that there were different kinds of 'bad' stories that he should worry about. There are 'manufactured' stories such as Steven Spielberg's protest against China's role in Darfur. That was very much a stunt, trading on Spielberg's links with anti-genocide movements. It was political. All you can do to 'counter' that is to talk through your own policy as much as possible. That is what they did, putting their ambassador up for interview to anyone prepared to listen.

Then, I said, there are 'real' stories such as the way that some regions of China have been plunged into drought conditions because water has been diverted to the Games. When a regional governor protested to the central Government that was a moment when a real problem was being revealed. All you can do there is be open about how you are dealing with the issue.

Finally, I said there are stories like Tibet where you are in error. You have to stop oppressing people. But you can also explain why you have a territorial claim to Tibet and that your plans for the region have a longer-term context.

Now I don't think China can spin the criticisms away. It is not a free country and its influence beyond its borders is too rarely benign. But the China story is moving and it needs telling with fresh eyes. The fact that an embassy official sat down for a few hours to listen and exchange views with someone dedicated to media freedom and open journalism is a sign. It may only be a sign of more sophisticated public relations tactics. Real policy towards Tibet doesn't look to be changing. It may just be a short-term change that will end when the Olympic torch moves off

towards London. But now China has moved on to the world stage and opened its borders to the media I get the sense that things cannot be the same.

[Roy Greenslade](#) has an excellent article [here](#) about how journalists are trying to get around the restrictions.

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