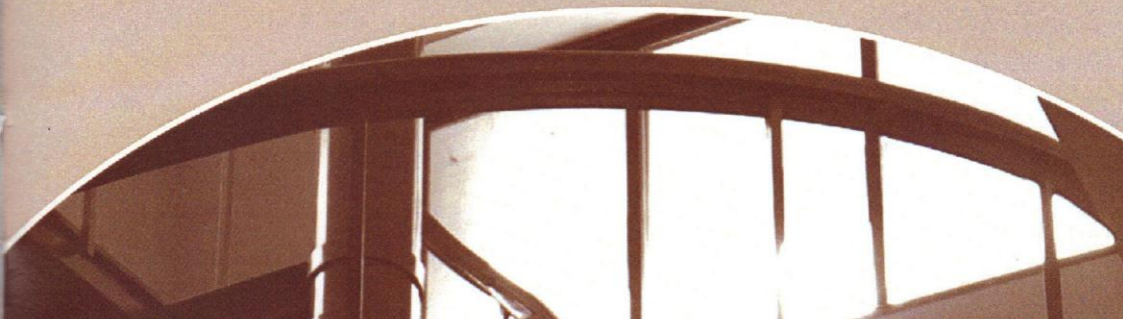Saurabh Kumar

THE CHINESE MEDIA SCENE
A POLITICO-STRATEGIC TAKE ON THE STATE OF P

THE CHINESE MEDIA SCENE:

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ON THE STATE OF PLAY

Saurabh Kumar

COVER PHOTO:

A photograph (depicting riot police marching with placards that read "Building a Harmonious Society") circulated widely on Sina Weibo, a leading Chinese social media platform, with the satirical comment "who would dare to be unharmonious ?"(Sina Weibo)

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THE CHINESE MEDIA SCENE:

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Introduction

The following account of the changing media scene in China, and its impact on the polity, is based on a survey of openly available literature on the subject (in particular, the excellent collection of overview articles by Western and Chinese scholars in the book "Changing Media, Changing China", Ed..Susan L. Shirk, OUP, 2011) and a monitoring of (English language versions of) Chinese media websites and some official Chinese documents available on the I-net. It is a subjective assessment of the state of play. As such, responsibility for the overall picture (and judgements made or borrowed) rests squarely with the author, even though no originality can be claimed for the inputs – insights from the works of several others – utilised herein. These remarks were prepared, in the main, for the NIAS seminar on "Rising China" in December 2011.

2.   There has been a sea-change in the Chinese media scene in recent decades. As in other fields, the altered scenario is the result of re-orientation of the focus of all work of the Party (and State), away from the "politics in command" dictum (to correct for "left deviation" errors made during the "lost decade", 1966-76, of the Cultural Revolution), to economic construction, reform and

opening up to the outside world that was decided upon at the landmark (December 1978) 3rd Plenum of the 11th Central Committee of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP CC) under the influence of Deng Xiaoping. It might be useful to take a look at this changing, and changed, landscape around the following schema, before concluding with an overall assessment of the state of play in the media-polity dialectic:

I. <u>Scenario at the Ground level</u>:

   a) Press

   b) TV

   c) I-net and social media

II. <u>Censorship Scene</u>

III. <u>Impact of New Information Environment</u>

IV. <u>Official Approach in the Changing Scenario</u>

I.   <u>Scenario at the Ground level:</u>

3. The key elements could be described as follows:

a) <u>Press</u>

- There has been phenomenal growth over the last three decades – from 69 in 1979, the number of newspapers has risen to about 2000 today; about a dozen of these

with circulation of a million plus. The number of magazines has likewise soared to over 9000.

- The growth has not been quantitative only -- a commercial media and lighter social (entertainment) media has emerged as a result of the post-'78 change in policies and processes. The latter have resulted in relaxation of controls to permit:

  - freer expression (hence the more lively style of newspapers and journals now as compared to earlier),

  - raising of revenues through advertising (alongside withdrawal of budgetary support from Government), resulting in the press being constrained to cater to audience tastes in news content and style,

  - retention of profits (resulting in rises in circulation across the board, despite cessation of mandatory subscriptions by Govt. Departments since 2003).

- The PLA daily is, however, an exception to the above-mentioned trends:

  It has been protected from this transformation affecting the civilian media and remains fundament-ally unchanged, operating on the old "propaganda first, profitability second" maxim and presenting the same old sterilized image of the PLA to its audience

in the soldiery. It has its captive readership of 2.5 million intact, having successfully bucked the trend of stopping mandatory subscriptions by all departmental units.

This has to be understood (together with the steady increases in PLA budget allocations over the last 15 years) as the CCP's compulsion to keep this ultimate guarantor of power to rule satisfied and loyal.

b) <u>TV</u>

By far more influential than the press (being the sole source of news and entertainment for the 60% population in the rural areas), TV is, not surprisingly, more tightly controlled. There is no competition, as in case of the press, with only the staid State owned channels operational.

Yet TV producers too have to pay attention to ratings and audience preferences if they are to earn advertising revenue. TV in China has been described by one Chinese journalist (Miao Di) as a double gendered rooster – "Propaganda Departments like it to crow, while Finance Departments want it to lay eggs"!

A balance of sorts is sought to be struck by the TV channels -- by producing politically innocuous and leisure (entertainment) programs, not hard news or incisive panel discussions.

c) <u>I-net</u> :

Here there has been a dramatic expansion since embrace of the I-net by the CCP/State in 1992/93, with about 500 million users today (as many as half of them estimated to be intensive ones, i.e. tweeters and/or bloggers).

What the people think of the leadership and the Government (but does not find expression in the press and on TV) is increasingly being reflected in the 'microblogosphere', obliging authority to be sensitive to its 'digital image' (or the image of the 'digital twin' of the Party State, as it has been termed) in the virtual world and to pay attention to what is being discussed there and interact with the netizenry.

[Some smart senior (provincial) Party functionaries have opened their own micro-blogs (in their real names) to reach out to their citizens. Many officials and offices have tweeting accounts, which they use to communicate directly with their constituents. Also there is acknowledgement, publicly, of the increasing (ideological) influence of blogs, including those of foreign Governments – of Embassies in China (posted on Chinese sites) engaging in "public diplomacy" -- on opinion leaders amongst Chinese netizens.]

Public opinion communicated through on-line forums and weblogs, reinforcing the more liberal elements in the press, is increasingly setting the governance agenda and the terms of public debate.

Not surprisingly, it is the social media that is regarded as the most potent threat out of all the media forms.

4. Overall, the most notable feature of the Chinese media scene today is a **new information environment marked by the emergence of a hugely expanded, and financially independent, press (including a market driven segment in metro areas) and an alert, and growing, on-line public opinion that cannot be wished away by officialdom**, try as it may.

5. This change has come about despite little change in the ownership structure of the press and TV (which have been kept, almost all, in the hands of media groups led by Party or Govt. newspapers with the help of a restrictive licensing policy), and therefore obviously cannot be said to be an unqualified one. It is subject to several caveats and conditions, and nuances, but the main trend is clearly as above.

II.   Censorship Scene

6. So what does this mean in terms of censorship by officialdom ? Has the old ham-handed approach of the pre-reform period, when the media was treated as a department under the direct control of the Propaganda Wing of the CCP and Information Departments of the State, been given up? No, not at all, but today the preferred methods are indirect (and considerably more sophisticated) ones, mindful of the adverse publicity such brute force control brings.

7. Political compliance in case of the press and TV is ensured through trusted groups of professionals and others closely connected to the CCP power centers, who are given charge of oversight (such that they need no more than informal guidance) – the managing group of editors groomed within Party circles. In case of the I-net, control is exercised through the licensees of the news web-sites. (Even if they be non-Party individuals, they are made to fall in line probably by leveraging on the largesse of Government grant of privileged – sometimes monopoly -- status to them. Choice of the operators in the private sector in this sensitive field is, in the first place, unlikely to be made carelessly, without regard for their background and family connections – the notorious Chinese *guanxi* or informal networks of relationships.) Their "perceived disassociation" from Govt. is what gives credibility to this "non-official" media, which is in reality not non-official but the same official face of the State, essentially, wearing a different hat.

8. People, especially intellectuals, use the official press for tracking nuances of Govt. policy and the commercial media and I-net for obtaining credible 'real' news.

9. The main features of the situation on the censorship front are:

   a) Commercialization of the media has "opened a gap in the Chinese Govt.'s control of the news media" (according to journalist and human rights activist He Qinglian, author of "Media Control in

China", published in 2004 by the international NGO, Human Rights in China).

Competition for audiences provides a strong motivation for the press (and news sites) to publish/post a news story before the authorities impose a ban on it. Thus there has been an exponential expansion in the amount of information available to the public and, concomitantly, an unprecedented enhancement of space, and possibilities, for protest, as witnessed in the early phase of the pro-Google Net commentaries last year before the '50 cent Army' – so known for posting 'paid comments' at the behest of the State for a small payment -- was invoked in no time in order to overwhelm the initially spontaneous outburst of comments favorable to Google with contrived contrary ones masquerading as genuine (counter) trends in public opinion.

b) Magazines are not controlled as strictly as newspapers, perhaps because of their limited impact (lower frequency of publication and smaller readership); so also the economic and commercial press.

c) While censorship of the press and TV is subtle (and largely invisible), that over the I-net is done without making any bones about it – it cannot be otherwise, for it becomes obvious anyway. Two cartoon like characters (named *jingjing* and

chacha, after the Chinese language characters for 'police'–*jing cha*) appear on the computer screens of users on specified websites to remind them of their being monitored, on the ostensible plea of publicizing the message that the I-net is not to be regarded as a space beyond the purview of the law.

d) Change of form, and style, but not in essence: on umpteen occasions, the Chinese authorities have shown that they will do whatever it takes to make sure that information reaching the public by any means (including through the commercial media and I-net) does not have the potential of rousing the latter to challenge CCP rule.

10. The most notable aspect of the (essentially unchanged) story of censorship and control of the media in China is the emergence of a chink in the censor's armour, and the fact that **the political game is changing** as a result (as described in the following sections), all attempts by the authorities to retain control over the new media, as with the conventional media hitherto, notwithstanding.

III.   Impact of the New Information Environment

11. In terms of chronology, commercialization of the media picked up momentum only in the 90s, after recovering from the regression that followed the June 1989 Tiananmen events (the brutal, and highly controversial, suppression of protests by students and

members of the public seeking political reform, which left the entire system in a state of shock, as it were).

12. The 2003 SARS crisis has been termed as a turning point in the relations between the State, media and the citizenry, exposing as it did the soft underbelly of the clamped up and instinctively restrictive Chinese Party State. China was seen, internationally in the court of (world) public opinion, to be directly responsible for creating a global pandemic, all out of nothing as it were, because of its scant regard for transparency and full disclosure norms and desiderata even in a non-sensitive, indeed non-political, area like health and that too in the wake of an obviously looming humanitarian crisis. The dismissal of the Health Minister it resulted in could not but have shaken media policy too. (To the core, in fact, in all likelihood -- in internal debates within the CCP, irrespective of the dour front presented to the world outside).

13. 2008 was an important landmark, with the passage of an RTI like provision and a high profile visit to the People's Daily office by President Hu Jintao on its 60th anniversary, soon after a successful, CCP directed, experiment with information transparency during the Szchuan earthquake a month earlier. He utilised the occasion to articulate a new approach towards the media, chatting with netizens and stressing the need for the (official) media to take the initiative to shape and "channel public opinion," (*yindao yulun)*. The first "mass incident" (official Chinese term for public protest demonstrations and social unrest events) was reported (in the official media) a week later, and authorities at

various levels soon began to use online official state media like People's Daily Online and Xinhua Online to report sudden-breaking incidents at the earliest – something that would have been considered unthinkable previously, for fear of inviting social and political instability.

[The numbers of such incidents are now acknowledged, officially, to be rising drastically in recent years – to as many as 180,000 in 2010, according to a reliable estimate. The rush for reporting them has resulted in y*indao yulun* being described, (resentfully) in popular parlance, as "grabbing the megaphone", showing that there is contention over the opportunity for setting the agenda.]

14.   The overall impact of the new information environment can be discerned in several dimensions:

- <u>Greater independence</u> for the press and media in general -- gradually, as a result of Chinese journalists' increasing interaction with their counterparts abroad (which has led to journalists re-examining their self-perception of their professional role).

- <u>Political – domestic:</u> comment is relatively freer (than before), other than on taboo topics that are widely recognized, and tacitly accepted, as sensitive subjects. Examples of the latter would include subjects such as the CCP's monopoly

over power, competitive multi-party system, separation of powers (within the party – in obvious, albeit pale, imitation of the Montesquiean precept of mutual independence between the judiciary, legislature and executive), pros and cons of subordination of the military to the State (rather than the Party), Tiananmen '89, Tibet, Taiwan, fundamental issues such as the relationship between political power and business interest, power and corruption and so on.

- Political – foreign policy/affairs related.

  There are two main trends here:

  a) shedding of reserve, both in content and in form (in expression and style): The emergence of a 'non-official' media is utilized (by the establishment, albeit without publicity and with plausible deniability in reserve) to come out with comments in unrestrained language in a manner unthinkable in the past. In other words, the 'non-official' media has served to redress the asymmetry, from the Chinese point of view, they suffered from vis-à-vis States with a free press, where rabid and hard line opinion (on all issues but on relations with China in particular) could find public expression without possibility of reciprocal compliments from the Chinese side (so long as all their media was, or at least was perceived to be,

official). Now this so-called unofficial media segment is utlised to convey blunt messages to other countries, under cover of its representing 'a section of opinion', when it is an open secret that opinion expressed therein takes its cue from official quarters, invariably. Thus both Global Times, and its TV equiva-lent, the Hong Kong based Phoenix TV, have extensive ties with the CCP through the top echelons of the People's Daily and CCP CC.

b) <u>heightened blowbacks</u> (<u>from</u> the usually volatile <u>on-line public opinion</u>) <u>into the foreign policy process</u>: These come via a multiplicity of channels (some direct and others indirect, through the impact of on-line chatter on new constituencies such as the PLA, businessmen, youth, conventional media etc.), resulting in foreign policy decisions being influenced and buffeted by a variety of actors now, as compared to the past when the (putative) 'central mind' of the Party State was the sole determinant.

[Contrary to the commonly held view that the Government itself resorts to fanning hard line nationalist sentiment with the aim of diverting attention away from its domestic (governance) shortcomings and abating questioning of its legitimacy to rule, it has been noted that there is today likely fear of a

boomerang effect, possibly because of realisation that this process can easily go out of control and may, in fact, leave the Government worse off (i.e. without any good options for dealing with situations and possibly even be counter-productive). This applies, above all, to relations with Japan, where historical memories provide fertile ground for fueling of nationalist passions, but also to relations with USA (over the Taiwan issue and otherwise as well). The Government would not like to (and perhaps cannot afford to) be seen to be weak in its dealings with these countries above all, for fear of historical parallels being drawn to its disadvantage.]

- Passage of RTI like provision in 2008: the "Regulations on Open Government Information" require officials to release information during disasters and emergencies and permit citizens to seek various kinds of information (even without an emergency, as happened in case of a request for Shanghai budget allocation figures that was initially turned down, on the plea of being a State secret, but later complied with following a wave of censure in the press, including in the State news agency Xinhua).

- Growing vigilante watchdog role, with some journalists and netizens engaging in advocacy and activism.

[Citizen journalism – Chinese style: The term "human flesh search engine" has come into vogue, to describe the newly emergent phenomenon of individuals (or even officials as well, at times) believed to be involved in immoral or illegal activities being caught in camera (on the cell phone or video) and then exposed on the Net, with these stories (often fed into the press and TV) frequently generating pressure on the authorities to take cognizance and act.

Thus, e.g., a Shaanxi official, Yang Dacai, was sacked earlier this year after an I-net campaign exposed his several expensive watches well beyond affordability with his legal income. (The individual who initiated the campaign has earned the nick-name 'watch watchdog' for his ambition to focus on expensive watches as a means of promoting the goal of full disclosure of wealth of officials.) Likewise the blind human rights activist, Chen Guachang's exposure of forced sterilizations led to huge public protests of human rights violations. There are several other cases of remedial action taken in response to joint action by affected groups (such as local residents opposed to location of potentially pollutant factories in their neighbourhoods, parents of school children who died due to collapse of a shoddily constructed school building or tainted milk powder and so on). They came to light after their success; there are likely to be many more, with lesser degree of success, unknown, or not so

well known, to the public at large even within China, not to mention the world outside.]

- Rise of 'people power' of another kind – of organizing for self-help, rather than depending on Government. This is a new phenomenon: people coming forth with public (on-line) offers of help (support through personal involvement of one kind or another, going beyond monetary assistance) to those in adversity during calamities (Szchuan earthquake, Beijing flood and the like).

- Media influencing adjudication outcomes in the courts, both directly (via inflamed public opinion against official culpability for wrong doing) and indirectly (through the impact of media exposés on Party officials, which lead them, at times, to feel obliged or encouraged to intervene in the courts -- for opportunistic or populist reasons).

15.   The propaganda wings of the CCP and the State, always adept at thinking on their feet, have been bracing themselves up to match, and master, the challenge of growing 'people power' facilitated by the I-net. Acutely aware of the importance of the microblogosphere as the new battleground for winning over public opinion in a hyper-connected world, the CCP leadership has tried to revive its time honoured messianic message and combine it with emphasis on the need for mastery of the new medium: exhorting local Party secretaries and other officials to "understand and comply with the will of the people", as "servants of the public", while encouraging

them to become 'new media' savvy. This manner of practice has been dubbed as "Control 2.0″ to describe the more sophisticated directions in which information and news management has been evolving in recent years.

16. Overall, there is little doubt that the **I-net has considerably eroded the tight control that the CCP traditionally exercised over political communication**, transcending as it does the one way, top down, time-consuming communication of the conventional media.

IV.   <u>Official Approach in the Changing Scenario</u>:

17. **Officialdom is "deeply ambivalent" about the new information environment** fostered by the social media and I-net and commercialisation of the press and TV. In the words of some broad minded Chinese journalists cited in Western scholarship:

- It recognizes its potential benefits (and inevitability, may be) – improved governance and strengthened popular support accruing from checks on errant local/provincial governments and/or officials, greater efficiency (in the process of economic development) through better informed markets and so on.

- But it is also acutely conscious of the severe risks it is subjected to in consequence – opening of political space for crystallization of opposition and new demands being made on the establishment that the latter may not be able to

meet, as e.g. generation of pressures for revelation of the activities and cogitations of the top leadership, full disclosure of the life-style of the Party's *nomenklatura* etc.

By opting to give up some degree of control, they make a trade-off -- hoping to reap the former (advantages), while feverishly seeking to avert the latter (risks).

18. A distinction needs to be made here on two related dimensions:

a) Level, i.e. national or provincial and lower, and

b) nature of issues, i.e. governance and livelihood issues, on the one hand, and political issues, on the other.

There is a divergence between the approach (and interests) of the central and local leaderships. So long as the grievance or issue over which information or involvement is sought by the public are not political in nature but pertain to livelihood or governance related matters, the central leadership may not be averse encouraging the media, it may be surmised, to play a watchdog role to help it exercise oversight over provincial and local authorities. So it may actually find it expedient to encourage the system to relinquish control (over the media) and embrace greater transparency and openness. It is only when systemic issues – of a political nature – are at stake that it is likely to be conservative and restrictive in its approach. Or at least some aspect

that was likely to provoke sharp differences of opinion at the topmost levels of the (central) leadership – i.e. in the Politburo and/or its Standing Committee.

19. The **nightmare scenario for the central leadership** would, it may be surmised, be a combination of a new media fed/bred opposition movement at the ground level and an elite split at the top, as that would seal the fate of the rulers in the absence of military backing – something that may not be forthcoming in such a charged socio-political situation.

[Tiananmen June 4, 1989 is the defining moment in this regard as it almost brought down CCP rule. But for Deng Xiaoping's enormous political weight, which enabled the (divided) Politburo to take a decision to invoke the military against the protesters (and evoke compliance from the PLA for the same – two Generals were rumoured to have declined to send troops to suppress the protesting students), all might have been lost (from their standpoint).

And that was before the age of the instantaneous mass media; before the color revolutions in Eastern Europe, Iran 2009, the Arab Spring revolutions of last year and, above all, the Anna Hazare movement in India -- each of which would have given the CCP jitters, we can be sure.]

20. The destabilizing potential of the new communication technologies, and the freer environment within which the social and electronic media function

today, would undoubtedly be a question to which the CCP would be paying extremely close attention. (Allusions to the need for proper "management of the I-net" have, notably, been made in every Report of the head (General Secretary) of the Party at each Party Congress post-'92.)

21. Their watchwords might be guessed to be something on the following lines:

    a) prevent large scale social unrest from crystallizing at any one point (or a credibility gap on any issue, be it a localized one, from becoming a rallying point nationally);

    b) avoid public splits in the top leadership ranks;

    c) ensure loyalty of the PLA at all costs.

Spread of the I-net and new social media and commercial-ization of the conventional media have consequences for all three aspects, albeit most of all in respect of the first.

22. Hence the frightful, almost apocalyptic, 2010 reaction to Google, which appears to have been viewed officially to have had the makings of a 'digital Tiananmen 1989'.

23. Hence also the continuing attempts all along to impose various restrictions on I-net users – the end 2011 requirement that service providers ensure that users use their real names being the latest.

V.   Overall Assessment

24. China's media policies have been characterised as an "inconsistent amalgam of improved transparency and responsiveness, on the one hand, and huge investments in more effective censorship, on the other". It is not surprising therefore that the human rights activist He Qinglian has assessed that Chinese journalists may be "dancing in shackles" but they are dancing all the same! Caught between the liberating influence of commercialization and instantaneous digital communication technology, on the one hand, and the choking impact of controls, on the other – the tussle between the (official) push for *feng* ("block" or censorship) and the (normative) pull of *shai* ("conducting activities under sunshine" or transparent disclosure) -- they (and the netizens) have become adept at playing a cat and mouse game with the censors, increasingly to the disadvantage of the latter in the I-net age.

25. This change, significant as it is in a longitudinal perspective, is confined – so far – to nuts and bolt issues relating to governance and livelihood matters that affect people directly and where judgements about right and wrong are straightforward and clear cut. It does not extend to abstract (political) questions with a bearing on systemic shortcomings and administrative reform, in conformity with the official line permitting – even welcoming – "constructive criticism" but not freedom of speech that is potentially disruptive of "social harmony" or "political stability", the two watch-words of the CCP.

[Hence the popular satirical description of silencing of outspoken individuals as "having been harmonised" (*bei hexie*). And, likewise, skeptical popular perception of the euphemism "stability preservation" that is liberally prefixed or suffixed in official lexicon to nomenclature of all kinds of activities -- as e.g. projects, programs, organizations, seminar themes, budget Heads (and even bonuses payable to cadres in one province, where part of bonus payments due were withheld for being released later, subject to no "stability disruption" activity/acts attributable to the cadre's non-performance, or lack of vigilance, being found subsequently upon review).]

26. Explosive growth of **on-line public opinion, and** pressures stemming from **commercialization**, **are**, nevertheless, **altering the strategic interaction between the leadership and the public** all round, as the former struggles to head off social unrest and maintain citizen allegiance and acceptance of legitimacy of its authority.

27. The jury is out on the question of the stability, and future, of the Chinese polity under the impact of a media changing as above. Will it run along the lines scripted by CCP apparatchiks, seeking to "sustain their collective belief in a paradigm of control" by putting the new features of the modern (digital) media to 'good' use but trying to contain the risks they pose for preserving their authoritarian, nay totalitarian, regime ? No one can say.

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