

China's Control of Information

THE CHINESE GOVERNMENT USES A MIX OF PROPAGANDA, DISINFORMATION AND REPRESSION to stifle free expression and to present a positive image of its actions in Tibet to the outside world. Chinese authorities exercise a high degree of scrutiny on the flow of information throughout the People's Republic of China. In April 2010 the Chinese government sought to strengthen their hold on information by revising its "State Secrets Law" to include provisions specifically geared at hampering freedom of information through information communications technologies. While the Chinese government does not openly admit that it censors internet content, it is widely known to the Chinese public, who, fearing reprisals, often exercise "self-censorship" and avoid sites dealing with topics such as democracy, the Dalai Lama and the 1989 Tiananmen Square incident. State censorship and suppression of free expression is widespread across the PRC.

Despite promises to the international community and the International Olympic Committee for open access to press in the lead up to the Olympics, Chinese officials enforced a media blackout in Tibet in the spring and summer of 2008, allowing only a select few, closely monitored delegations access to predetermined areas in Tibet. In the face of these restrictions, Tibetans continued to speak out, and interrupted some of these state-organized tours with pleas for human rights and the return of the Dalai Lama (see ICT report: <http://www.savetibet.org/media-center/ict-news-reports/monks-reveal-concerns-about-chinese-allegations-weapons-caches-views-olympics>). Without free access for the media in Tibet and penalties for low-level information sharing—such as simply making a call to a friend outside Tibet or sending an email—among the most severe in the world, it is difficult to get an accurate picture of the situation on the ground.

Following the March 2008 demonstrations, authorities sentenced a Tibetan female cadre in her thirties to five years in prison for passing on news through the telephone and internet about the situation in Tibet to the outside world (see: <http://www.savetibet.org/media-center/ict-news-reports/disappearances-continue-across-tibet-tibetan-woman-sentenced-talking-telephone>).

The Chinese media's treatment of the March 2008 demonstrations was a prime example of the Chinese government's policy of shaping the news to meet its interests, as in addition to censored internet content, TV and print news stories were edited along the Party-line. Following the March 2008 demonstrations in Tibet, most internet content displaying raw footage of the events was blocked throughout China and Tibet, with the exclusion of state-approved clips used to portray the unrest as a "violent riot."

Similarly, in a directive from the propaganda department surrounding Chinese reporting of the Yushu Earthquake in April 2010, officials called on reporters to "talk of the earthquake in 'scientific terms,' do not criticize the earthquake forecasting agency; do not focus too much on the efforts by Buddhist monks to help the victims; and give extra coverage to the appeals for donations organized by state-owned CCTV." (See: Reporters Without Borders, <http://en.rsf.org/china-shanghai-expo-earthquake-qinghai-censorship-29-04-2010,37231.htm>)

Separate from censoring the press, Chinese authorities extend their efforts to audiences outside of China in order to shape international opinion of their actions in Tibet. The Tibet Pavilion at the 2010 Shanghai Expo focuses on "New Tibet, Better Life" and features expressions of "Tibetan people's patriotism" and the success of development projects like the Qinghai-Tibet Railway. However, the 2008 demonstrations and numerous independent reports attest to a much different reality (See: www.savetibet.org/media-center/ict-news-reports/bold-report-beijing-scholars-reveals-breakdown-china's-tibet-policy). An important part of the state's propaganda policy is that official state delegations of Tibetologists travel to western countries expounding upon Chinese development efforts in Tibet and vilifying the Dalai Lama as a reactionary splittist, dangerous to the state. These delegations often invite westerners to "see for themselves," though, oftentimes the Chinese government denies complete access to Tibet for press and governmental delegations requesting to visit.