

Chinese journalists test free speech limits

Former investigative journalist Haiyan Wang describes the ways in which Chinese reporters push the boundaries of press freedom.



This is an edited transcript of our interview with Haiyan Wang. Former investigative journalist Haiyan Wang describes the ways in which Chinese reporters push the boundaries of press freedom. Listen to the interview [here](#).

Interviewer: Our fourth principle reads: “We require and create open and diverse media so we can make well-informed decisions and participate fully in political life”. To what extent does this apply to China?

Haiyan Wang: In China, the media is quite controlled by the party and the state. In the mainstream media - newspapers, TV, radio, etc. - you would not expect to hear very diversified voices. There is only the voice dominated by the government. But journalists in the traditional media can push the boundaries, using different strategies and tactics. Sometimes that might create a voice other than the government’s but on the condition that they will pay a price afterwards. There is also online

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media in China now, which is growing very fast, and there are other forms of alternative journalism, like underground publications and underground newspapers. Public intellectuals and expelled journalists have turned to underground publications to try to give a different voice. There are also online media, like blogs and Weibo, the Chinese version of microblogs, and this is also a very important platform for people to express different opinions.

Interviewer: How do people push those limits you were speaking about in traditional journalism?

Haiyan Wang (2.04m): In traditional journalism, there is often a difference between the journalists and their managers - editors, newspaper directors, the media group etc. The journalists use many different strategies to try to bypass the government bans and restrictions. To give a small example: When there is a ban, for example because an accident happened, journalists know that the government will issue a ban and not allow journalists to report the accident. So they would try to get ahead of the ban, what is called racing the ban, conduct the interview and publish the article before the ban is issued. They also put bans on certain words. For example, the government would say you cannot use the term "Tiananmen Massacre", so journalists would not use the term "Tiananmen Massacre" but instead use some ambiguous word just to disguise their real intention, but then invite readers to read between the lines. They play language games with the censors.

Interviewer: What about the other unconventional forms and new forms of journalism?

Haiyan Wang (3.52m): There are different forms of alternative journalism. One of them is underground publications. They still publish in a traditional form, like a magazine or paper. There were a few of them in the past few years in Guangzhou, in the south of China. But they were soon shut down by the government. The other form of alternative journalism is online journalism, which is growing very strongly because a lot of people now use blogs. One of the significant groups of these bloggers are journalists. Unlike UK journalism, who usually have a blog on their newspaper's official website, where they still play the role of that newspaper's journalist, Chinese journalists have their personal blogs that are somehow related to their newspapers, but where they can say much more than when they publish in the newspaper. So they use their personal blogs as a platform to get more more information and to tell the truth, what they want the public to know. Now there is a new phenomenon in China since 2010: Weibo. Weibo is a microblogging website. As many scholars have discussed, Weibo has shown great democratic potential because at least 10 per cent of China's population are on Weibo now. And they break news on Weibo, and then the government has to answer.

Interviewer: Could you tell us how investigative and activist journalism have changed in the last couple of years?

Haiyan Wang (6.42m): Investigative journalism in China started after Tiananmen. It entered journalism in 1999, and since then I have witnessed investigative journalism grow in China. The peak time was 2003, when two important things happened. The first was the SARS [a contagious

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respiratory disease] outbreak. Investigative journalism played a role because SARS caught international attention and the Chinese government was really fearful of the international community witnessing that China was undergoing such a huge public health issue. A lot of people died, partly because of the seriousness of the disease and also because the government was really late in handling the crisis. So a lot of people could not be cured in time and died. Investigative journalism played a role, in that they tried to report the real death toll of the disease, went to the hospitals and interviewed the doctors, outspoken doctors, about what was really going on. They played an important role in informing the public about this crisis.

The other instance in 2003 was the [Sun Zhigang](#) case. He was a college student who moved to Guangzhou to find a job. On the first day he was there, he was caught by the police because he did not carry his ID card. The police held him in a detention camp and a few days after that he was found dead. An investigative journalist from the Southern Metropolitan Daily went to investigate the case. Of course, the police and government were very angry but the reporting of that case really caught the attention of the national elites and intellectuals and lawyers, and they all joined in the campaign to call for the abolition of the law that said you have to carry an ID card and that gave the police the right to hold people at their will.

The law was abolished because of pressure from the public. After that, in 2005 and 2006, investigative journalism went down a bit because a new government came to power, President Hu Jintao and Prime Minister Wen Jiabao. They wanted to build a harmonious society in China, and to build this harmonious society they wanted not to hear about bad things happening in the media, who were largely restricted from reporting so-called negative news. Also, the propaganda the government issued saying that media organisations cannot cross boundaries, e.g. Guangzhou news organisations cannot report negative news in a neighbouring province. That was not allowed. This hurt investigative journalism a lot.

Investigative journalism in recent years has not reached the same level as in 2003. There are two reasons: first, the rise of online media. The power of traditional media is greatly weakened. Secondly, because of the political environment, which is not the same as in 2003. The media organisations are under pressure, and they are less willing to invest in very risky investigative reporting. They could use their revenue; they could lose their advertisement. They could lose the political trust of the party. So I think investigative journalism is weakening.

Interviewer: Are the new forms of journalism and investigative journalism helping the country and what is their value?

Haiyan Wang (12.54m): I still think that journalism is playing a very important role in China and in the public life of the Chinese people. In China, there is actually no civil society. There are very few middle-level organisations in between the government and the people. So journalism and the media play an important role. And the Chinese had a tradition of believing journalists, because journalists were intellectuals in the past in China, and intellectuals enjoyed a very good reputation

in the Chinese tradition. So people trusted what journalists and the media were saying, although the media is now very much controlled by the government of course.

The other thing is, if you are asking whether investigative journalism has changed China a lot, I think of course it changed in a certain way. It has changed laws and it has exposed some corruption and held some lower-level government officials to account. Also, they helped people gain justice and win trials when there was a dispute with the government. There was a case in which a young woman accidentally killed two officials who tried to take advantage of her. Journalists got involved and eventually the young woman was exempted from the death penalty. So that is one case where the media really helped the weak fight against the powerful and especially the government.

Moreover, online media played a huge role in China. Weibo played the role of a public sphere. It is the only place where a lot of Chinese people can participate in public discussion and express their views freely. Of course Weibo is controlled, but it is a relatively free place. In that way, its democratic function is very obvious. But in the end, still, my personal view is that democratisation is a long process in China and in the long run it really depends whether the government wants democracy or not. If the government does not want it, it can use all the ways to control the media, control Weibo and control all the online sphere and cut off all the internet connections. That is possible. So I think the most important reformative power should be within the government and within the party.

Interviewer: Do you think that, given how the online environment and online media have changed, that there can be as much control as before?

Haiyan Wang (18.06m): I think Weibo is a temporary phenomenon. It is just for today, for a couple of years because new media comes and goes. A few years ago, for example, BDS broadband was very popular and people pinned very high expectations on BDS forums in China. And then came mobile phones, and then blogs, and now microblogs. So it will come and go. And if you look at the company which runs Weibo - it has a very special background. It is totally under the control of the government, actually. And the company can choose to shut down some of the voices, and they are actually doing it right now to political dissidents. Their personal IDs in Weibo were blocked. There is much censorship on Weibo. A few journalists were spreading news about a sensitive topic, and then the journalists were discovered and the company handed over the information to the news organisations. The propaganda department of the government punished and expelled the journalists right away. So if they want to, they can just take actions. Weibo is a temporary phenomenon in my personal view.

Interviewer: Judith Bruhn. Transcribed and edited by Free Speech Debate.

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