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Boss Hu and the Press

June 30, 2008 in [China Around the World](#) by [The China Beat](#) | [15 comments](#)

In early May, we published the first installment of our feature, "China Around the World." We asked scholars, journalists, and graduate students working outside China and the US to reflect on Chinese media and coverage of China. This reflection on the implications of Hu Jintao's recent visit to the People's Dailynewsroom is from Nicolai Volland, an Assistant Professor in the Department of Chinese Studies at the National University of Singapore.
By Nicolai Volland

One June 20, Hu Jintao paid a high profile visit to the *People's Daily*. His foray to the editorial offices of the CCP mouthpiece was first announced in the form of what turned out to be all but a Hoax: "[General Secretary Hu chats with Chinese netizens!](#)" The news [spread like a wildfire](#), but surfers who rushed to the *People's Daily's* "[Strong Nation Forum](#)" found themselves barred from entering. Disappointed, they vented their anger in the freely accessible [Tianya forum](#).

As it turned out, they may have missed little. Sitting in the offices of the *People's Daily*, "Boss Hu" (*Hu zong* – the slightly irreverent way Chinese netizens refer to Hu is, ironically, a consequence of Hu's name being blocked by most online forums) looked at a screen and was read three questions asked by what presumably were loyal and prescreened users of the forum. All [questions](#) were harmless ("Mr. General-Secretary, what do you read on the web?" "Mr. General-Secretary, do you review many suggestions and proposals from netizens on the web?"). Hu answered to one of the forum's editors, who keyed in the general secretary's answers. Then the "chat" was over and Hu rushed on to other business – his real business.

It turned out that Hu Jintao's June 20 visit to the *People's Daily* was not accidental, and the "chat" was but a deft move to raise the publicity of his visit. So much has become clear in the following days, when the Chinese media began to roll out a massive campaign relaying the importance of Hu's visit, with the *People's Daily* itself [spearheading the movement](#). Hu Jintao used his visit to the offices of the paper to deliver a short but carefully planned speech to the newspaper's assembled staff; in fact, his target audience were not the several hundred employees of the Central Committee organ, but rather the three millions employees across China's vast media sector in general. Hailed as a "[programmatically document](#)" by the Central Propaganda Department, [Hu's speech](#) in fact sets out the rules for the Chinese media not only for the upcoming Olympics, but in fact for years to come.

Hu's visit and the high profile attached to it is not without precedent. For more than half a century, CCP top leaders have made it a tradition to visit the Party press and, in the course of "chats" with editors and journalists, to outline the Party's policy towards the media. In April 1948, Chairman Mao visited *Jin-Sui Daily*, one of the CCP's wartime papers. His "[Talk with Editors at Jin-Sui Daily](#)" was included in volume four of Mao's *Selected Works* and has since been a cornerstone of CCP press theory.

In 1956, Liu Shaoqi held two meetings with journalists at the Xinhua news agency in which he signaled a significant relaxation on the ideological front that became known as the "Hundred Flowers" policy. Xinhua staff should not dogmatically copy the Soviet TASS agency, said Liu, but also see what might be learned from the news agencies in capitalist countries (Liu's remarks were quoted by radicals from Beijing media units during the Cultural Revolution and were taken as evidence of Liu's "crimes").

In 1985, then general secretary Hu Yaobang paid a similar visit to *People's Daily*, as did Jiang Zemin in 1996 (thanks to Alice Lyman Miller for the references to the visits of Hu and Jiang). [Jiang's speech](#) was given wide publicity, especially his attempts to balance the media's function as loyal mouthpieces of the Party with their emerging role in "public opinion supervision" (*yulun jiandu*) through means such as [investigative journalism](#). It is thus obvious that Hu tries to place himself within a long tradition of making major announcements of media policy through visits to the Party's top media. So what are we to expect from the Chinese media in the coming years? A closer reading of

Hu's June 20 speech tells us much about core points of the CCP's media policy in the twenty-first century.

First of all, what makes Hu's speech interesting are his acknowledgement of new developments in the Chinese media industry. In particular, Hu mentions the popular urban dailies (*dushibao*, such as *Nanfang dushibao*, the cutting edge investigative paper from Guangzhou) and the Internet as crucially important new components of the Chinese media landscape. The rise of a popular press appealing to readers' tastes in a competitive market is probably the biggest change in the decade since Jiang Zemin reiterated the importance of the Party papers. Hu elevates the product of the Party's media reforms and the commercialization of the press sector and gives them legitimacy within the Party-dominated public sphere. In a similar vein, the electronic and web-based media are now officially incorporated into the CCP's media theory – as demonstrated by Hu's "chat" with surfers at the Strong Nation Forum.

However, Hu Jintao is quick to balance the newly emerging media and their counterpart, the Party press, and lay down an authoritative definition of the respective roles of the two media types: "With the Party papers and broadcasting stations as the mainstay..." – the commercial papers are supplementing the role of the Party press, but are by no means supposed to replace the latter. In fact, the urban dailies and the web-based media are what the Party press is to the CCP: "propaganda resources" (*xuanchuan ziyuan*). Hu Jintao acknowledges the existence of a "multi-layered public opinion" and the need to take all these layers into account in the Party's propaganda work. That seems to be evidence for a more sophisticated and flexible approach to thought work and propaganda.

Propaganda, however, is the core theme of Hu's speech, and it remains the defining framework for the Chinese press of the 21st century. The overall parameters have changed remarkably little, and in these respects Hu's speech closely follows Jiang's 1996 address. Indeed, in the very first paragraph, Hu speaks of the "news front" (*xinwen zhanxian*), a term that is decades old; the militaristic vocabulary harks back to the CCP's perception of the media as a weapon in its struggle for power. Of all the media principles that Hu consequently invokes, the first and most prominent is *partiinost* (*dangxing*), a Soviet concept that has been the core of the CCP's approach to the media since the 1930s. Its reiteration in the current context is a clear signal that the basic line remains what it has been: the press – no matter Party press or other media – must unwaveringly follow the line of the Party center.

The third and fourth paragraphs of Hu's speech in particular are outright cold war rhetoric. Hu declares that "News and public opinion are at the forefront of the ideological field," and in the next paragraph he explains that China finds itself amidst an intensifying ideological conflict with the West ("...the struggle in the field of news and public opinion is getting more intense and more complicated"). The means of this struggle may be changing, but not its nature. China's ideological conflict with the West remains as acute as ever in the eyes of the CCP's top leader. These are the external factors that determine the Party's use of the media. In his explanations on *partiinost*, Hu says that "correct guidance of public opinion benefits the Party, the nation, and the people"; incorrect guidance, in turn, is prone to bring disaster: the CCP has learned its lesson from the democracy movement in 1989 and from the breakup of the Soviet Union. The CCP is not going to let it happen in China.

A crucial measure to ensure that the Party stays in control of the media is journalism education. Again, Hu takes his cue from Jiang Zemin, who had stressed the same point in 1996. As the gatekeepers in the media field (there is no pre-publication censorship in the PRC, so journalists and editors are responsible to judge what goes and what not), journalists will be carefully watched; their ranks may be weeded from time to time, to ensure that they stick to the role the Party has assigned to them. Over the last years, the CCP has driven an aggressive push to standardize registration and examination of prospective and practicing journalists, and in light of Hu's speech, more of the same may be in the offing.

In the run-up to the Olympic Games, the Chinese media have been in the headlines repeatedly. On the one hand, the Party has cracked down across the board, discouraging expressions of dissent before and during the Olympics. In particular, publications that have existed for many years in the cracks of the Party-state, such as the popular English-language magazine *That's Beijing* have been

ordered to shut down or have seen takeovers by their Chinese joint venture partners. Experiments with new media forms are clearly not encouraged.

On the other hand, much has been written about the surprisingly [swift and broad coverage of the Wenchuan earthquake](#), when the Chinese media ignored an early ban on reporting and went into a nearly round-the-clock coverage of events, while Xinhua and the other paragons of the state media stood by. An emancipation of the Chinese press? Less so in Hu Jintao's eyes. The upsurge in earthquake reporting was [quickly brought under control](#) and was superseded by massive mainstream propaganda that focused on the heroic rescue efforts of the PLA and the national Party leadership. Controversial topics such as construction problems at school building that collapsed and corruption were quickly suppressed. Well done: Hu Jintao congratulated the *People's Daily* staff on their extraordinary achievements during four major news events earlier this year: the winter storms that brought traffic to a collapse in much of Southern China, the struggle to "protect social stability in Tibet," the preparation of the Olympics, and finally, the Wenchuan earthquake.

No fear of media openness, then; the CCP has demonstrated its ability to open up temporarily but quickly rein in the media once a return to its close control of the media was deemed desirable. Overall, both Party media and their more popular counterparts have played their role within the Party's concert on the "news and propaganda battle front" remarkably well. In his speech Hu Jintao, or "Boss Hu," as the surfers at Tianya called him, has summed up from the theoretical vantage point the experiences of the past decade, and has staked out the direction for the next years: be open to the new, but only once it is effectively co-opted and integrated into the Party's existing framework of governance.