



Published on *Freedom House* (<https://freedomhouse.org>)

[Home](#) > China

## China

**Country:**

[China](#)

**Year:**

2016

**Press Freedom Status:**

Not Free

**PFS Score:**

87

**Legal Environment:**

30

**Political Environment:**

35

**Economic Environment:**

22

### Overview

China is home to one of the world's most restrictive media environments. The already limited space for investigative journalism and online commentary shrank during 2015, continuing a trend of ideological tightening since Xi Jinping assumed the leadership of Chinese Communist Party (CCP) in 2012. Censorship of news and internet content related to the financial system and environmental pollution increased as the economy slowed and smog intensified, adding to the topics' political sensitivity.

### Key Developments

- Professional journalists from established news outlets were detained, imprisoned, and forced to air televised confessions. After a number of new arrests during the year, there were 49 journalists and online writers behind bars in China as of December.
- Liberal, commercialized news publications encountered growing financial and political pressures, while the influence of party mouthpieces and state-subsidized outlets grew. Authorities imposed restrictions on two well-known finance publications that had also reported on corruption.

- Dedicated internet users continued to employ circumvention technology and other creative tactics to defy and bypass restrictions on free expression. The government responded by increasing efforts to block circumvention tools, including through innovative cyberattacks and intimidation of software developers.

### Legal Environment: 30 / 30

Article 35 of the constitution guarantees freedoms of speech, assembly, association, and publication, but such rights are subordinated to the discretion of the CCP and its status as the ruling power. Moreover, the constitution cannot, in most cases, be invoked in court as a legal basis for asserting individual rights. Judges are appointed by the CCP and generally follow its directives, particularly in politically sensitive cases. There is no press law that governs the protection of journalists or the punishment of their attackers. Instead, vaguely worded provisions in the penal code and state secrets legislation are routinely used to imprison Chinese citizens for the peaceful expression of views that the CCP considers objectionable. Criminal defamation provisions and more informal judicial interpretations—including 2013 guidelines related to “online rumors”—are occasionally used to similar effect. During 2015, the National People’s Congress adopted several laws or amendments that codified existing media controls, increased penalties for political or religious expression, and required technology firms to assist security agencies with investigations: A National Security Law was adopted in July, amendments to the Criminal Law took effect in November, and an Antiterrorism Law was passed in December.

Mainstream print journalists were formally arrested or sentenced to prison during 2015. Such treatment had long been more common among internet-based writers, ethnic minority journalists, and freelancers. According to the Committee to Protect Journalists, at least 49 journalists and online writers were behind bars in China as of December 2015, a record number for the country and the largest total in the world. The list included 18 professional journalists, though 14 of them were jailed on apparently trumped-up charges of financial mismanagement, corruption, or illegal business activity, masking the link between their detentions and their reporting or commentary. The overall number of Chinese citizens jailed for offenses involving freedom of expression, especially on the internet, was much higher.

The year’s most high-profile cases against professional reporters included that of Gao Yu, a prominent 71-year-old journalist who was sentenced in April to seven years in prison for “leaking state secrets.” In November, her sentence was reduced to five years and she was released from custody to serve the term at home due to deteriorating health. In August, journalist Wang Xiaolu of the prominent financial magazine *Caijing* was detained in relation to his coverage of the stock market.

Freelance journalists, writers, online activists, and a range of other Chinese citizens continued to be sentenced to prison or administrative detention, particularly for disseminating information online or sending it to contacts outside China. During 2015, dozens of individuals—particularly rights attorneys—who had used social-media tools for human rights advocacy or to express opinions critical of the government were arrested and prosecuted. Pu Zhiqiang, a prominent public-interest lawyer, was convicted in December of “stirring up trouble” and “inciting ethnic hatred” in relation to seven microblog

posts on the popular Sina Weibo service that mocked government officials and criticized the CCP's ethnic policies; he was given a suspended three-year sentence and released from custody after 19 months in detention.

Members of religious and ethnic minorities are subject to particularly harsh treatment for their online activities, writings, or efforts to disseminate information that departs from the CCP line. Several of the journalists serving the longest prison terms in China are Uighurs and Tibetans. In addition to journalists, ordinary Tibetans, Uighurs, and Falun Gong practitioners have been imprisoned for accessing, possessing, or transmitting banned information, or for being related to journalists living in exile. In June, for example, Radio Free Asia reported that Tsering Dondrub, a young Tibetan man, was detained by police for reportedly sharing images of a Tibetan flag and the Dalai Lama—in advance of the spiritual leader's 80th birthday—via WeChat, a popular mobile-messaging application; no further details on his status were available at year's end. According to Amnesty International, Li Xiaobo, a Falun Gong practitioner from Sichuan Province, was sentenced to eight years in prison in April for distributing Falun Gong leaflets.

Chinese law does not ensure free public access to official information. Under open-government regulations that took effect in 2008, many agencies have become more forthcoming in publishing official documents. However, the courts have largely hesitated to enforce information requests, and government bodies routinely withhold information, even regarding matters of vital public concern.

The extensive CCP-controlled apparatus for media regulation continues to evolve, particularly with respect to online media. A new CCP body established in 2014, known as the Central Internet Security and Informatization Leading Group, coordinates work on cybersecurity and internet management. The group appears to have full authority over decisions on the entire online sector, including cybersecurity, the urban-rural digital divide, and content regulation. It is headed by President Xi Jinping, Premier Li Keqiang, and longtime propaganda chief Liu Yunshan. The prominence of the Cyberspace Administration of China and its head, Lu Wei, in developing and implementing internet controls also increased during 2015.

Journalists and other media workers are legally required to hold government-issued press cards, though some report without one. Those who violate content restrictions risk having their press-card renewals delayed or rejected, being blacklisted outright, getting fired, or facing criminal charges. In 2015, regulators for the first time issued press cards to online news reporters, allowing them to conduct interviews and report news directly, rather than simply republishing reports by traditional media. However, the 594 permits issued were distributed in a discriminatory manner, with only reporters from party or government-run websites receiving accreditation, while staff from major commercial portals like Sina and Sohu were excluded.

### **Political Environment: 35 / 40 (↓1)**

The CCP maintains direct control over news coverage through its Central Propaganda Department (CPD) and corresponding branches at lower administrative levels. Routinely forbidden topics include calls for greater autonomy in Tibet and Xinjiang, relations with

Taiwan, the persecution and activism of the Falun Gong spiritual group, the writings of prominent dissidents, and unfavorable coverage of the CCP and its leaders. In addition to these standing taboos, the CPD and provincial censors issue secret directives on other subjects that are communicated regularly to website administrators and traditional media editors. Directives issued during 2015 “guided” reporting or required deletion of content related to stock-market plunges, major industrial accidents, the popular environmental documentary *Under the Dome*, high-level cases of official corruption, and extremist violence. Freedom House analysis of 75 leaked directives published by the U.S.-based website *China Digital Times* in 2015 found that the most commonly targeted topics were health and safety, the economy, official wrongdoing, and censorship itself. This represented a notable change from a similar analysis conducted for a 19-month period in 2012–14, when the economy was only the seventh most censored topic.

CCP leaders use control of the media to propagate positive views of the party, the government, and the president, while vilifying those deemed to be their enemies. In 2015, the authorities also continued to employ more subtle means to influence news coverage. In many cases they proactively set the agenda by allowing key state-run outlets to cover potentially damaging news in a timely but selective manner, then required other media to restrict their reporting to the established narrative. Popular web portals were ordered to highlight or downplay certain news items on their homepages in accordance with government and CCP priorities.

Restrictions on investigative journalism and liberal, commercial media outlets tightened during the year. Although they have faced increased pressure since 2012, events in 2015 were decisive in reducing the influence and financial viability of these outlets, which had tried to carve out some independent space in a politically restrictive and highly competitive market. In April, authorities revoked the publishing permit for *Moneyweek* and shut down the website of the *21st Century Business Herald*, two well-known finance publications that had also reported on corruption. In August, Guangdong Province authorities published a report listing various new requirements that had been imposed on the Southern Media Group, owner of some of the country’s most influential liberal news outlets; the rules included an increase in the percentage of CCP members among its employees.

Meanwhile, a number of new, state-subsidized digital media platforms gained readers and increased the dominance of official narratives. The most prominent was the *Paper*, a web-based, mobile-friendly publication that is funded by the government through the Shanghai United Media Group. It attracted many young Chinese readers with its incongruous combination of propaganda-like pieces, arts and culture news, and social exposés that occasionally get censored. Its achievements reportedly pleased top officials and led to similar projects in at least six other provinces and municipalities. Meanwhile, traditional party mouthpieces, like *People’s Daily* and the national broadcaster China Central Television (CCTV), increased their presence on social-media sites.

Nationwide technical filtering restricts internet users’ access to uncensored news and information hosted outside of China. The system permanently blocks well-known international platforms such as YouTube, Wikipedia, Facebook, and Twitter. A range of Google services, the photo-sharing site Flickr, and cloud services like Dropbox joined this list in 2014. Domestic equivalents of these sites have gained popularity, but they are obliged to employ automated programs and thousands of human censors to screen user-generated content and delete relevant posts in compliance with CCP directives. Some

foreign internet companies have also cooperated with the Chinese government on censorship enforcement.

A social-media crackdown that began on the domestic microblogging service Sina Weibo in 2013 was extended to the messaging application WeChat during 2014 and 2015. Several dozen public WeChat accounts used by journalists, activists, and internet portals to disseminate articles on current affairs were shut down or suspended, and such accounts were then prohibited from posting or reposting political news without official approval. A 2015 study of deleted posts from this type of account found evidence of automatic filters for common taboo topics as well as frequent postpublication censorship of messages with keywords related to politics, corruption, and tabloid-style gossip.

Although millions of users are believed to employ online circumvention tools and proxy servers to access banned content, this has become increasingly difficult as Chinese authorities have intensified efforts to identify and block virtual private networks (VPNs) and other popular tools. Several developers reported greater obstructions for their users and technologies in 2015.

Despite these efforts, China's robust censorship system was unable to completely stop the circulation of unfavorable news in 2015. For instance, after chemical explosions in Tianjin killed at least 173 people in August, investigative journalists, news websites, and social-media users defied official orders by sharing updates, identifying key individuals who played a role in the disaster, and raising questions about officials' culpability. More generally, Chinese internet users routinely employ homonyms, homophones, and other creative tactics to buck censorship on domestic microblogging sites, and information sometimes spreads among users before censors are able to deem it "sensitive" and intervene. To circumvent the more rigid restrictions on their formal outlets, journalists have turned to personal microblog accounts to share sensitive information that might otherwise go unreported, though such channels are increasingly being scrutinized and blocked by censors.

In addition to censorship, the authorities have taken steps to actively guide user discussion online. Since 2004, CCP and government officials at all levels have recruited and trained an army of paid web commentators. Their tasks include posting progovernment remarks, tracking public opinion, disrupting or diverting criticism, and participating in public online chats with officials to provide the appearance of state-citizen interaction.

Conditions for foreign media in the country are highly restrictive. Foreign reporters continued to face harassment during 2015, including occasional physical attacks, hostile editorials in state media, and intimidation of their Chinese sources and staff. The authorities used website blocking and the threat of visa denials to retaliate against foreign journalists and news organizations for reporting they deemed objectionable. In December, journalist Ursula Gauthier was expelled after publishing an article in a French magazine that was critical of Chinese government policies in Xinjiang. In September, shortly before Xi Jinping's state visit to the United States, Chris Buckley of the *New York Times* was granted permission to return to China; he had been forced to leave the country in 2012 after authorities refused to renew his press credentials. The websites of a number of foreign news outlets are consistently blocked in China, including those of Bloomberg

News and the *New York Times*, which were banned in 2012 after they reported on the wealth of top leaders' families.

Since 2007, foreign journalists have been free of internal travel restrictions in most areas and allowed to conduct interviews with private individuals without prior government consent, but the looser rules do not apply to correspondents from Hong Kong, Macau, or Taiwan. In addition, travel to Tibet and other politically sensitive regions still requires prior approval and close supervision by authorities. In 2015, access for foreign journalists to Xinjiang and Tibetan areas was especially restricted, making it very difficult to report independently on violent clashes between Uighurs and security forces in Xinjiang and ongoing self-immolation protests by Tibetans.

Violence against Chinese journalists and online whistle-blowers remained a concern during 2015, while arbitrary detention and abuse in custody were growing problems. Harassment of ordinary citizens by security forces also sometimes touches on freedom of expression issues, as was evident in the year's sweeping crackdown on hundreds of human rights lawyers and their assistants, many of whom had criticized government actions on social-media platforms.

An increasing number of journalists and online writers face retaliatory detention in the form of criminal cases based on trumped-up charges, often for supposed economic crimes rather than content-related offenses. In December, Shen Hao, the former chairman of 21st Century Media whose idealism and professionalism inspired a generation of journalism students, was sentenced to four years in prison on extortion and embezzlement charges that many colleagues believe to be fabricated.

Conditions for journalists and online activists in custody are poor, and medical attention is often denied, including for serious chronic illnesses like diabetes or heart conditions. Detained journalists are now also subjected to smear campaigns in state media and forced to participate in televised confessions. Gao Yu and Wang Xiaolu were among 10 journalists who appeared in televised confessions in 2014–15; the practice had been virtually unheard of before Xi Jinping became leader of the CCP.

The authorities are believed to use cyberattacks and other forms of aggression to disrupt websites and other online resources based outside China. In March, GitHub, a U.S.-based international code-sharing site that also hosts websites blocked in China, was hit with a massive denial-of-service attack that was traced to Chinese government servers and attributed to a new cyberattack tool researchers called the "Great Cannon." In August, two developers of circumvention tools in China deleted the code for their programs from GitHub, apparently after being intimidated by Chinese police.

## **Economic Environment: 22 / 30**

Media outlets are abundant in China, with approximately 2,000 newspapers and hundreds of radio and television stations operating in 2015. Reforms in recent decades have allowed the commercialization of outlets without the privatization of ownership. Most cities feature at least one official newspaper published by the local government or CCP branch, as well as more commercialized subsidiaries. Some publications have private investors,

but the government is required by law to retain a majority stake. State-run CCTV remains the only licensed national television broadcaster, and all provincial and local stations are required to air its evening news programs.

Although the Chinese authorities continue to jam radio broadcasts by U.S. government –funded services such as Radio Free Asia and Voice of America (VOA), dedicated listeners access them online with the use of circumvention tools.

China is home to the largest number of internet users in the world, with the figure surpassing 660 million, or approximately 49 percent of the population, by mid-2015. According to official statistics, over half a billion people access the internet via their mobile devices. The vast majority of users have an account on at least one of several microblogging or messaging services, though the number of regularly active users is smaller. The censorship apparatus has moved to keep pace with this growth at the structural level. In addition to blocking individual sites and deleting content, the authorities are capable of imposing localized internet blackouts during periods of unrest. For example, local authorities completely shut down the internet in Aba County, Sichuan Province, for several months in 2015 after Tibetan monks protested against CCP rule.

As internet use spreads and provincial television stations gain viewers, fewer young people in particular turn to CCTV as their primary news source. Media regulators have responded in recent years with a string of new rules that restrict entertainment programming, especially during prime time, and starve provincial stations of related revenue. In 2015, new regulations for internet television and streaming providers restricted the use of set-top boxes and required prior approval of foreign television series. Regulators also issued rules in June to limit the prevalence of reality shows on satellite stations.

Most media revenue comes from advertising and subscriptions rather than government subsidies, even for many party papers. Nevertheless, the trend toward commercialization has been reversing in recent years amid a revived reliance on government funding, particularly for print media. With the combination of political and economic pressures threatening the quality and market positions of influential liberal publications, even the Southern Media Group, once among the most successful commercial media companies in China, was reportedly forced to accept millions of dollars in government subsidies in 2014.

Corruption among Chinese journalists and media outlets persisted in 2015, due in part to financial difficulties arising from the clash between media outlets' political obligations and commercial interests. It remained common for public-relations firms to pay reporters for attending press conferences and for favorable news coverage, and some observers noted that payments to news websites to remove negative coverage had become institutionalized.

**Note:** The scores and narrative for China do not reflect conditions in Hong Kong, which is assessed in a separate report.

**Source URL:** <https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-press/2016/china>