



Understanding China's State Media, their Role, Resources and Utility in China's Soft Power Push

Speaker: Zakka Jacob, TV News Personality, CNN IBN

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The issue of media and censorship goes hand-in-hand in China. This was pertinently reflected in Zakka Jacob's talk wherein he shared his rich experience of three years working at the CCTV (Central Television) office in Beijing. He was the first Indian national to be hired (late 2010 early 2011) by CCTV. The presentation was rightly timed as the Indian court, the day before this talk, had revoked the much debated Section 66A which restricted 'freedom of expression' with respect to social media postings. This judgement reflects the complexity of the functioning of media in different countries. In the Asian continent itself, we see two differing examples of the media's role and performance. In a country like China, the media is a 'mouthpiece of the Party' and in India, it is a tool of expression. It also essays the critical role that media can play in today's globalizing world and in the functioning of a state.

Jacob substantiated his views about media in China by sharing first hand experiences during his stint at CCTV. He structured his talk into few segments that encompassed the structure of CCTV, the changing state-media relationship, and how China was utilizing the media to project itself as a soft power globally. The ambiguity surrounding the notion of 'state-secret' gives the state an upper hand to pull up the reporters even on innocuous issues.

The speaker introduced the various organizations that looked into the functioning of the media in China. Until his tenure, the SARFT (State Administration of Radio, Film and Television) was the official body that was in charge of the media and its functioning. However, under President Xi Jinping's leadership, the SARFT has been merged and the new body is called the SAPRFT (State Administration of Print, Radio, Film and Television). The recruitment of the foreign staff was done by SARFT and had to be approved by

the 'foreign office' that came under SARFT. Each foreign staff was handed a little 'blue book' called the 'foreign experts book', which was similar to the Hukou meant for indigenous migrant workers. Further, the speaker informed about the CCTV behemoth that included twenty-five stations, five different foreign language channels including English, French, Russian, Arabic and Spanish. He remarked that the year 2008 was a watershed in the media industry in China for the number of events that occurred that year. The Sichuan earthquake was the first event that CCTV (both Chinese and English editions) covered live extensively. Even the report of a scam regarding corruption in the distribution of temporary housing to disaster victims was aired. Basically, non-political news was given some amount of space for coverage. The two other major events that received wide coverage were the 2008 Olympics and the launch of Shenzhou 7 into space. These incidents made the state realize that the media was an under-utilized tool. Drawing inspiration from the Al Jazeera model, China decided to expand its state media. Li Changchun, the then Head of Propaganda of the CCP praised the media for its contribution in covering these three game-changer events in the history of China.

Taking a step further, the media office received the consent of higher authorities in expanding beyond China's national boundaries. Consequently, CCTV Africa (late 2011) and CCTV America (early 2012) were launched. Within a span of five years from 2008 to 2012, almost US\$ 8 billion was invested to expand the media industry of China. The two channels had to report to the heads of state of the respective countries and not to Beijing. In addition, they had more advantage than the indigenous CCTV, as sensitive issues like Tibet and Falun Gong could be freely broadcast. On the other hand, CCTV in China had to undergo stepwise editing of scripts by editors known as *laoshi* (party cardholders) who censored anything seemingly ultrasensitive. In an interesting instance, the state media was barred from mentioning the Diaoyu islands or the Senkaku islands as disputed areas after the Chinese government nationalized them in September 2012

After Xi Jinping's formal appointment as Party chief in December 2012, he told the media, 'the news should not be about what the leaders did but about what the people did'. After receiving 'signals' from the 'master', the official media underwent a temporary change. The most important programme with maximum number of viewership, *xinwen lianbo* (CCTV Tonight), for a few weeks reduced its timeslot for political leadership from ten minutes to around ten seconds. The clampdown on CCTV in 2013-14 was a game changer as it brought to book an influential and a popular host. The media fraternity realized that it was hard to be spared. As a repercussion, media people avoided taking regular routine editorial decisions even though the issues were innocuous in the political sense. The credibility of the state media received a major blow when there was no representation of CCTV during the Bo Xilai case (later half of 2012) as the CCTV leadership chose to be cautious. Contrastingly, the western media was omnipresent.

Later, it was realized that there was a need to be proactive in major sensitive issues than to remain dormant.

The speaker argued that despite its financial resources, the state media found it difficult to 'buy' credibility. The speaker expressed concern that the whole notion of journalism was under threat owing to the lack of leniency in the management of its media industry. If such an approach were to continue, the speaker opined that the day is not far when CCTV could very well be labeled as Russia TV. He concluded by mentioning that the practice of controlling its media could jeopardize the power of information in authoritarian regimes like China, thereby, killing the essence of empowerment through the dispersion of information.

Discussion

A few questions were asked regarding the speaker's experiences of being pulled up for going against the official line. The speaker shared two incidences in this regard. The first pertained to a question he had raised about what lessons Cuba could learn ideologically from China, given that both were communist nations. The second instance had occurred when he had questioned China's voting with Russia at the United Nations on the issue of Syrian war. However, the speaker denied any kind of indoctrination of the anchors by the authorities concerned.

There was a question regarding the representation of India and Tibet in the Chinese media. The speaker clarified that it was the US, which was mostly covered and followed, and that India received little attention. However, sensitive issues like Xinjiang and Tibet got significant coverage. For instance, the self-immolations in Tibet were termed as acts of violence and described as breach of territorial integrity and sovereignty by China.

The speaker surprised everyone when he shared that CCTV English has a huge following among Chinese students who wished to improve their English language skills but didn't care about the content, reflecting that anything western was considered good.

Regarding the funding of the news channels, the speaker apprised that it was dependent on a humongous amount of money that entertainment channels earned through advertisements and not from the state. He also mentioned that the foreign counterparts of the Chinese journalists were paid a lot more.

A short discussion was carried out on elements of dissent, exposés and so on. *Chai Jing* (Under the Dome), a video on the issue of pollution in China was specifically discussed. The speaker emphasized the role of social media in making such issues relevant and leaving the state paranoid. A lot of censorship was

done on Weibo and as a result simple mediums like WeChat were sought after. However, sometimes the exposés are also done on the signaling of the authority, like those on Apple and Starbucks.

Responding to a question on the survival dilemma of journalists in China, the speaker opined that though they are forced to make compromises, at least the speaker, speaking for himself would not have exchanged it for anything else. He described China as a layered country with contrasting experiences. In the end, he added, it was high time for Chinese media to be like Al Jazeera and not Russia TV.

Report prepared by Alpana Verma, Research Assistant, Institute of Chinese Studies.

About the Speaker

Zakka Jacob is a TV News personality with more than 12 years of verifiable experience. He currently works for CNN IBN and covers foreign affairs. He has anchored and covered some of the defining news stories of the last decade. Some of his most important works include the Asian tsunami of 2004, the Mumbai terror attacks 2008, the leadership transition in China 2012 and most recently the Indian General elections 2014. In 2011, Zakka left for Beijing to join China Central Television (CCTV). He became the first and only South Asian face on Chinese national TV. His important work during his three years in China was to cover upfront the leadership transition in China with the anointment of Xi Jinping and Li Keqiang.

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