

World Leaders Forum

Is China Moving toward a Fair and Balanced Press?

Only certainty is uncertainty, say panelists at first-ever spring semester World Leaders Forum



Diane Bondareff

By Ernest Beck

Reflecting China's changing economic climate, the Chinese have been testing the limits of freedom of speech and expression through the use of online communications, including blogs. Participants in a World Leaders Forum, held on Tuesday, Feb. 28, discussed the impact of latest trends on the journalism profession in China: does a more fluid economic and social environment also allow for greater press freedom?

Cosponsored by the Columbia Graduate School of Journalism and the Asia Society, and moderated by University president Lee C. Bollinger, the symposium—part of the World Leaders Forum, which this year expands from United Nations week in September to include events year round—explored the paradoxical situation faced by today's Chinese journalists. On the one hand, they are experiencing an unprecedented freedom to travel and gather information, as well as pressure to conform to market demands; on the other, they are still banned from exploring certain topics—most notably, Tibet, democracy and Taiwan.

"We zigzag; we walk a fine line," said Anthony Yuen, managing editor and

anchor for Phoenix TV in Hong Kong. If the central government does not like what a station is running, he said, they can "turn off your signal"—something that he fortunately has yet to experience.

Xiguang Li, executive dean for the School of Journalism & Communication at Tsinghua University in Beijing, pointed out that it is illegal to support Taiwan's claim for independent statehood. Journalists interested in writing about Taiwan would have to consider the

implications for their career, he said. Panelist Aryeh Neier, president of the Open Society Institute, picked up on Li's point, noting that to this day, journalists who go too far risk paying the price of being jailed or having their newspapers closed. But there is good news as well, he added, which is that for all the journalists who are imprisoned, many more have

been seeking ways to expand the boundaries of press freedom "in a non-confrontational way." As a result, "lots of good things are happening with freedom of the press." One crucial issue that will help to determine China's capacity for improved news coverage has less to do with the government than with the status the Chinese assign to journalists in their society, noted a number of panelists. To this day, most Chinese journalists have only a

worked in China for several years.

Moreover, in an atmosphere of rampant capitalism, journalists may be even more inclined to take a bribe, she said—figuring it is their due from a system that thus far has provided them with comparatively few rewards.

By the end of the discussion, the only certainty was uncertainty: the bid for greater freedom in China is still too early to call. The notion that by introducing a market economy you automatically get civil liberties has been disproved, Neier said, citing Russia as an example of a country where civil liberties are being constricted while the market expands. Elliott suggested that many Chinese have made a "Faustian deal" with the authorities, in which they are allowed to go make money and have a better life so long as they keep quiet.

But press freedom and civil liberties may be difficult to stop, the Chinese panelists said, as Chinese society modernizes, the number of students attending universities increases, and more people have cell phones and access to the Internet—despite attempts by the government to control search engines like Google and censor blogs.

For his part, Yuen concluded, if the government wants to limit freedom of the press, "they are fighting a losing battle."

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high school education and lack professional skills and training. As a result, they are underpaid, which leads to the widely accepted practice of taking bribes.

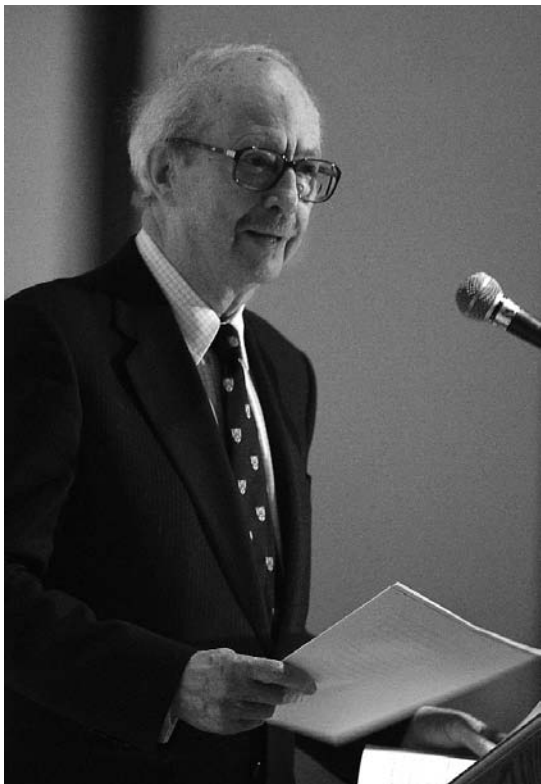
"You get a packet of money at a press conference, and that is a large part of a journalist's income," explained Dorinda Elliott, former assistant managing editor of *Time* magazine and a reporter who

worked in China for several years.

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Keeping the Flame of Liberalism Alive, Against All Odds

Honoring Fritz Stern's 80th birthday, Lord Dahrendorf sounds warning about rising illiberalism in Western countries



Eileen Barroso

Liberalism is under pressure in the United States and Britain as a "creeping authoritarianism" threatens the values that have inspired and brought millions of people to these two countries, according to Lord Ralf Dahrendorf, the renowned sociologist, philosopher and politician.

Speaking at a lecture in honor of the 80th birthday of Fritz Stern, the eminent historian of German and Jewish history who taught at Columbia for more than 40 years, Dahrendorf focused his talk on the perception that cherished ideals of the Enlightenment are now being eroded, and on the impact this development has on people like himself and Stern, both of whom fled Nazi Germany to countries they thought embodied liberal values. (Reflecting on his own life, he said that unlike Stern, he'd returned to Germany before ultimately settling in Britain and taking British citizenship.)

Introducing Dahrendorf, Christof Mauch, director of the German Historical Institute in Washington, D.C., said he is able to make Enlightenment ideas accessible to many people. "Few have greater vision and clarity," Mauch told the Columbia audience. In remarks about Fritz Stern, Columbia president Lee C. Bollinger affectionately observed that he is a man whom "you want to embrace and take with you."

In Dahrendorf's view, humans are not liberal by nature. "They miss liberty when it is absent, but take it for granted when it is under threat," he said. "This makes for such

a widely tolerated condition that one is tempted to call it normal." Therefore, he continued, it is important for an active minority in the early 21st century—led by thinkers like Stern—to "keep the flame of liberalism alive against all odds."

Although the measures that have been taken by the Bush administration beginning with the USA Patriot Act are by now familiar to everyone, the same process has also been taking place in Britain, Dahrendorf reported. The U.K. government recently announced plans for a compulsory identity card scheme and has also proposed to extend the period that terrorism suspects can be detained without charge.

All told, however, Dahrendorf is more worried about the effects of these trends on American people than on his fellow British citizens. He interpreted the lack of American public protest against the government's anti-terrorism measures as an indication that "the civic apathy so typical of America is spreading everywhere." Many Americans are accepting restrictions on their liberties in exchange for the security of a quiet life, he observed.

Yet Dahrendorf said he remains optimistic about America's future. History teaches that whenever liberalism is under pressure, the nation "has a capacity for change without violence." And with liberty so well entrenched in America's history, he added, "the reversal of the trends that put liberty under pressure may be just around the corner in this country—and in others as well."