

DR ALAN COCKER is head of  
*Communication Studies at AUT  
University.*

## Adequate China media overview but little that challenges

*New Media for a New China*, edited  
by James F. Scotton and William A. Hachten.  
Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell. 2010, 244 pp.  
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THIS BOOK argues that 'China today enjoys complex and highly advanced media through its newspapers, magazines, radio and television broadcasting, and cinema accompanied by the necessary ancillary services of advertising and public relations' (p. 207). It has the largest television market in the world with an audience of one billion people watching about 176 minutes a day (p. 85/p. 90), and in June 2008 China overtook the United States to boast the largest number of internet users on the planet at 253 million.

The country also has 550 million cell phone users (p. 96). *New Media for a New China* has 15 chapters written by different media scholars



and a central theme is the tension with a media caught between concern with 'satisfying their audiences and satisfying (or at least placating or not antagonising) government officials' (p. 9).

In China the government is described as owning and retaining firm, if sometimes erratic, control of all media from the most obscure journal to most popular national television network. The Chinese government is said to appoint all editors and managers (p. 24) and they constantly monitor central and local government rivalries to find out which issues can be presented safely.

The surveillance by state officials is extensive and pervasive. An estimated 30,000 to 50,000 monitors watch the web looking for pornography or references to such taboo subjects for the regime as democracy, freedom or Falun Gong (p. 29). The Chinese government can block access to outside sites rather easily since all international traffic must pass through a small number of state-controlled backbone networks.

New media are of particular concern for the government. President Hu Jintao has identified an uncontrolled internet as a serious threat. He told Communist Party officials in 2007: 'Whether or not we can actively use and effectively manage the internet ... will affect national cultural information, security and the long-term stability of the state' (p. 39).

With older media, such as the press, their role has been clearly established since 1949 as organs to disseminate the Communist Party's political messages. Television news clearly cannot directly criticise the government or established government policies and Chinese leaders require advance notice of any news with worldwide impact about to be broadcast by the national CCTV (p. 99).

However, since the 'market reforms' of the Chinese economy were introduced by leader Deng Xiaoping

in the 1970s, the country's media have been under the imperative to make a profit. The post-Tiananmen era from 1989 witnessed what one contributor portrays as a dramatic turn toward economic incentives allowing media commercialisation to flourish while further restricting freedom of political coverage.

'This produced a mix of Party logic and market logic that is the defining feature of media in China today' (p. 21). The ending of government subsidies has been a particular challenge for Chinese media and like their Western counterparts they have turned to entertainment content to attract viewers, listeners and readers.

One of the most successful commercial programmes that screened, on a provincial television station was a 'reality show' rather wonderfully entitled 'The Mongolian Cow Sour Yoghurt Super Girl Contest', while a 'cultural journal' which lost its government subsidy attracted a new paying audience with photos of semi-nude models and celebrity interviews.

In some chapters these market developments, which appear to mirror competitive commercial developments in the West, are put forward as promoting greater media freedom in China. The chapter on the impact of new media claims that they may well be developing into the 'public sphere' that Jurgen Habermas says is essential

to any democracy (p. 40). However, no evidence is presented to support this claim. The book fails to make a sustained and proven case that the 'market system' has fundamentally changed the relationship between the media and government in China.

Although the book provides an overview of the media in China it appears to most appropriately serve as an introductory text for students and there is little depth to any of the chapters. Coordinating the diverse chapters into a coherent and themed whole also is a problem with this book. In the preface, the editors state that three events of 2008—the revolt in Tibet, the earthquake in Sichuan and the Olympic Games in Beijing—'provide the prism through which we have in part studied China's vast media system and how it relates to authority and society' (p.ix). But this does not appear to have been conveyed very effectively to the contributors and these events do not provide a linked theme to the chapters covering the various media.

As an introduction to the media in China today this book provides an adequate overview for undergraduate students. However, for those looking for insight on the future of the Chinese media and its vexed relationship with its government there is little here for the serious scholar.

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