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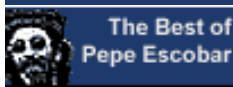
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## Greater China Feb 29, 2008



### Hoops and hurdles for Olympic media

By Josh Adams

BEIJING - Seventy-two years after black American athlete Jesse Owens sprinted to victory in Berlin in the Olympic Games - much to the chagrin of Adolf Hitler and his "Aryan racial superiority" - the incontrovertible connection between sport and politics has never been stronger.

The Beijing Olympics this summer are being heavily promoted as a global feel-good moment, with muscular young athletes performing heroic feats to the applause of millions. Beneath the surface, however, a quagmire of complex and unseemly issues threaten to make a mockery of the hackneyed "one world, one dream" mantra.

Many overseas journalists want to penetrate the shiny, happy Olympic facade to report on the gritty economic and

environmental realities of life in China, or put this year's Games in some human-rights context, such as the ongoing genocide in Darfur, brutal oppression in Myanmar, or the perennially sensitive topics of Tibet, Xinjiang or Taiwan. For them, the runup to August may not be so much of a "coming out party" as a frustrating, fruitless and potentially dangerous attempt to get at the truth.

When Beijing was bidding for the Games seven years ago, Chinese Olympic officials vowed to give international media

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"complete freedom to report when they come to China". In line with this promise, China lifted many of the restrictions placed on overseas journalists and photographers from January last year. However, despite the rhetoric and changes to legal fine print, there still appears to be a sizeable gap between international norms and the situation in the field.

In a recent survey by the Beijing-based Foreign Correspondents Club of China (FCCC), 40% of the 163 media professionals who took part reported experiencing some form of interference in their work since January 2007. They told of more than 157 separate incidents, including intimidation of sources, detentions, surveillance, official reprimands, and even injury to themselves and others. An overwhelming 95% of respondents said reporting conditions in China still fall short of what they consider to be international standards.

These findings run contrary to glowing reviews by state-run Chinese newspapers concerning the "greater access of foreign media". Speaking to the official English-language China Daily, Liu Jianchao, director general of the Information Department of the Foreign Ministry, recently commented, "We are encouraged to see that the new regulations have been widely welcomed. China has followed up on its pledge to facilitate the work of foreign journalists." According to Liu, he and his colleagues have been "swamped by constant positive appraisals from foreign correspondents on the far-reaching significance of the regulations".

One common complaint among foreign journalists in Beijing is the insufficient access they are given to government officials, particularly the nation's top leadership. One FCCC interviewee, who wished to remain anonymous, commented, "Government offices should reply to queries quickly and abandon the practice of requesting numerous faxes; they should reply to specific questions. The premier should hold more than one press conference per year. The practice of vetting questions beforehand should be abandoned. This should be a real press conference rather than a staged event."

As overseas journalists to cover the Olympics start to fan out across the country, they are already encountering clumsy local cadres unaccustomed to Chinese or foreign reporting on issues normally considered off-limits - these include land disputes, anti-

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pollution protests, and HIV/AIDS. Despite the good intentions of Beijing, this is creating ample opportunities for journalists to report on "oppressive" media restrictions enforced at provincial level by "security guards", hired thugs and overzealous minor officials.

Tibet and Xinjiang are two areas where reporting is still particularly problematic. A Beijing-based magazine reporter from the US, who also wished to remain anonymous, comments, "If you have a journalist [J-1] visa and are traveling in Tibet then there is a large chance you will be hassled by the local authorities in some way, irrespective of what you're there to report on. Where feasible it's easier to send somebody who doesn't have a J-1 visa because they can move around more freely."

These sentiments are borne out by the case of Harald Maass, correspondent for the German daily Frankfurter Rundschau, who was in Tibet last year to do an innocuous report on a group of Mount Everest climbers. Maass reported to the FCCC that he had been prevented by police from going to the city of Shigatse to do his story, while his interview subjects in Lhasa, as well as a travel agency he had hired a car from, were heavily fined and warned not to talk to him. On his return to Beijing, Maass was summoned by the Foreign Ministry and strongly criticized for his trip, being told to "correct his mistakes".

Another issue which has recently reinforced concerns that China may not be wholly living up to its Olympic promises is the compilation of a so-called "database" on foreign journalists. Despite a great deal of misinformation, it's now clear that the Chinese government has already created profiles of thousands of foreign journalists coming to report on the Games, and is gathering information on thousands more.

According to Beijing, information from the database will be provided to interviewees to protect them from being tricked or blackmailed by "fake reporters". In China, people sometimes pose as reporters to extort money from corrupt officials or demand payment for false promises of favorable news coverage; the China Daily states that a nationwide campaign launched in August and due to finish next month has already landed 150 fake reporters and 300 illegal publications.

Regardless of Beijing's claims, however, many journalists remain

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deeply skeptical about the function of this database, and it certainly takes an Olympic-sized leap of the imagination to see how a foreign reporter could really scam a Chinese party official or business leader, even if they wanted to.

Paris-based media freedom organization Reporters Without Borders (Reporters sans frontières) have unsurprisingly condemned the database, commenting, "Following the Communist Party of China Congress, we had been hoping for significant measures to improve press freedom before the Olympics. Instead, the government and organizers of the games have decided keep files on foreign journalists, supposedly in order to identify 'fake' ones. Keeping files on journalists opens the way for every kind of abuse."

Despite the widespread feeling in Beijing's foreign press circles that more still needs to be done to ensure proper media freedom in China, there are signs that things are gradually moving in the right direction, at least for overseas reporters. Old regulations forcing foreign correspondents to seek local government permission to travel have been temporarily rescinded, and 43% of those journalists surveyed by the FCCC stated that China's media environment had recently become less tightly controlled.

Commenting on the improvements, one Beijing-based US print correspondent explains, "There has been a big shift in attitude by the authorities. At a national level, there is a clear commitment to correct the old practices. On a local scale, there's still lots of confusion, however. They don't dare push you too much, and whatever they try it's always done with extreme caution and in a polite way."

Whatever the complaints, the conditions for foreign correspondents in Beijing and beyond are far more relaxed than for their local counterparts. The Hong Kong-based South China Morning Post recently reported that China's Propaganda Department has sent a directive to leading Chinese news media asking them to avoid publishing negative stories on Olympic-related matters, including issues such as air pollution, a dispute over Taiwan's inclusion in the Olympic torch relay, and public health.

One reporter with a Beijing-based magazine, who asked to remain anonymous, feels conditions for Chinese correspondents

will actually become more restrictive from now until August. He comments, "All officials or other high-ranking personages involved in the Games are prevented from receiving any interviews unless there is a prior arrangement with BOCOG [Beijing Organizing Committee for the Games]. I don't see any improvement in this issue, and conditions are getting worse with the Games drawing nearer and the whole Spielberg episode. After August it's impossible to imagine we shall be enjoying the same freedoms as foreign reporters either."

With less than half a year until the Games begin, it's still not clear whether the government has the means or desire to keep its promise of complete media freedom, and what will happen once the Olympic flame is extinguished. Despite the significant steps that China has taken over the past 20 years, a "transparency gap" with Western nations is likely to remain over the coming months, and this gap may grow wider in the face of sustained international criticism. Those journalists that show up expecting conditions for carte blanche correspondence are likely to be disappointed.

***Josh Adams** is a freelance writer and photographer living in Beijing.*

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